

The Awkward Age

Henry James

DELPHI CLASSICS

Parts Edition

The Complete Works of

HENRY JAMES

VOLUME 15 OF 65



The Awkward Age

Parts Edition
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Version 10

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‘The Awkward Age’

Henry James: *Parts Edition* *(in 65 parts)*

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Henry James: Parts Edition



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HENRY JAMES



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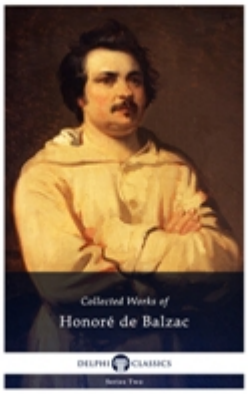


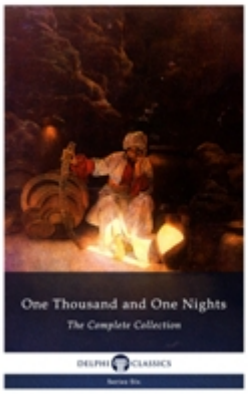
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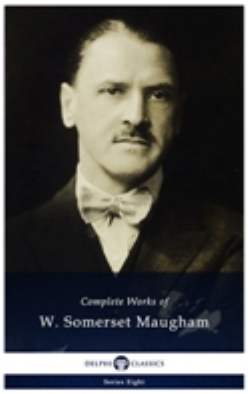
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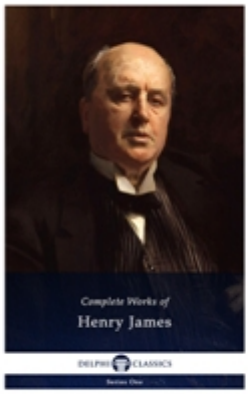
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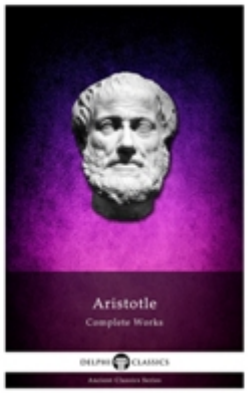


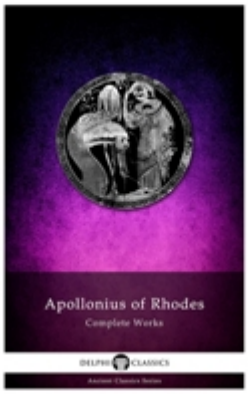


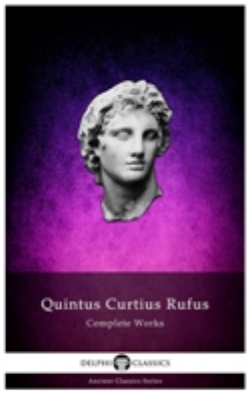




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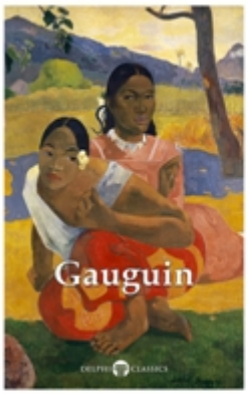


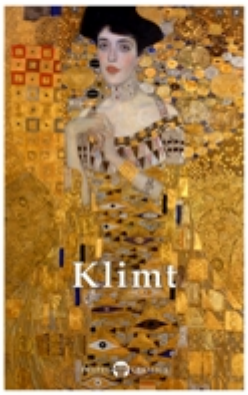




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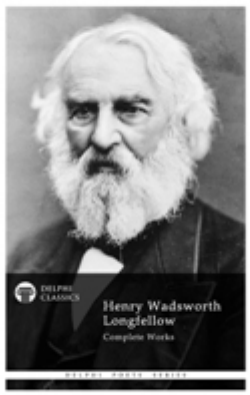


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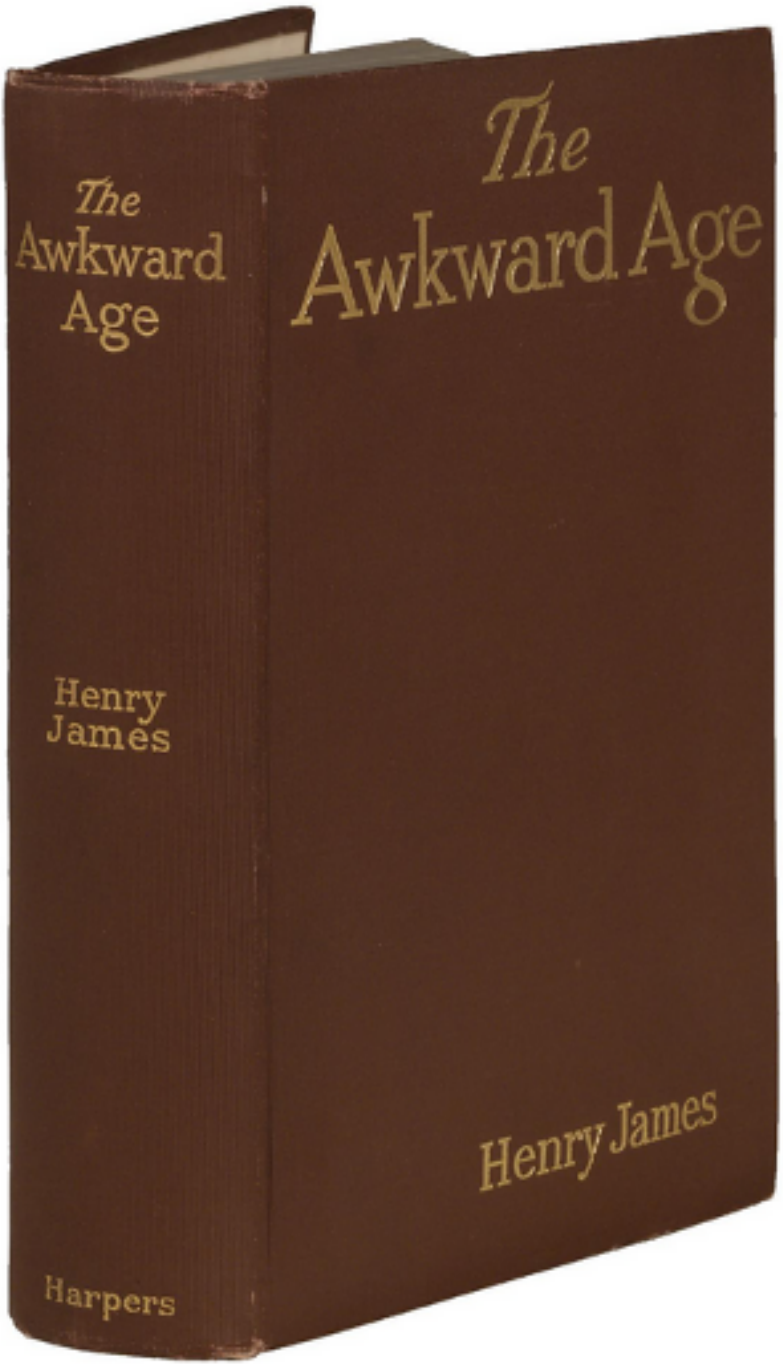
The Awkward Age



The Awkward Age was first published as a serial in *Harper's Weekly* in 1898-1899. Originally conceived as a brief, light story about the complications created in the family of a young coming of age girl; the novel then expanded into a general treatment of decadence and corruption in English *fin de siècle* life. James presents the novel almost entirely in dialogue, an experiment that adds to the immediacy of the scenes, but also creates serious ambiguities about characters and their motives.

The novel opens with Mr. and Mrs. Edward Brookenham hosting an effete, somewhat corrupt social circle. They are the parents of worthless Harold and sweet and intelligent Nanda, aged eighteen. Mr. Longdon attends one of their social functions and is amazed at how much Nanda resembles her grandmother, his long-ago love that married another man. Vanderbank, a young civil servant with little money, admires both Mrs. Brookenham and Nanda. Mrs. Brook seems to want an affair with "Van" but he appears more interested in the daughter, especially when Mr. Longdon promises him a dowry if he marries Nanda.

This collection contains James' much praised 1908 *New York Edition* version of the text, including its preface.



The first edition

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PREFACE

I recall with perfect ease the idea in which "The Awkward Age" had its origin, but re-perusal gives me pause in respect to naming it. This composition, as it stands, makes, to my vision — and will have made perhaps still more to that of its readers — so considerable a mass beside the germ sunk in it and still possibly distinguishable, that I am half-moved to leave my small secret undivulged. I shall encounter, I think, in the course of this copious commentary, no better example, and none on behalf of which I shall venture to invite more interest, of the quite incalculable tendency of a mere grain of subject-matter to expand and develop and cover the ground when conditions happen to favour it. I say all, surely, when I speak of the thing as planned, in perfect good faith, for brevity, for levity, for simplicity, for jocosity, in fine, and for an accommodating irony. I invoked, for my protection, the spirit of the lightest comedy, but "The Awkward Age" was to belong, in the event, to a group of productions, here re-introduced, which have in common, to their author's eyes, the endearing sign that they asserted in each case an unforeseen principle of growth. They were projected as small things, yet had finally to be provided for as comparative monsters. That is my own title for them, though I should perhaps resent it if applied by another critic — above all in the case of the piece before us, the careful measure of which I have just freshly taken. The result of this consideration has been in the first place to render sharp for me again the interest of the whole process thus illustrated, and in the second quite to place me on unexpectedly good terms with the work itself. As I scan my list I encounter none the "history" of which embodies a greater number of curious truths — or of truths at least by which I find contemplation more enlivened. The thing done and dismissed has ever, at the best, for the ambitious workman, a trick of looking dead, if not buried, so that he almost throbs with ecstasy when, on an anxious review, the flush of life reappears. It is verily on recognising that flush on a whole side of "The Awkward Age" that I brand it all, but ever so tenderly, as monstrous — which is but my way of noting the QUANTITY of finish it stows away. Since I speak so undauntedly, when need is, of the value of composition, I shall not beat about the bush to claim for these pages the maximum of that advantage. If such a feat be possible in this field as really taking a lesson from one's own adventure I feel I have now not failed of it — to so much more demonstration of my profit than I can hope to carry through do I find myself urged. Thus it is that, still with a remnant of self-respect, or at least of sanity, one may turn to complacency, one may linger with pride. Let my pride provoke a frown till I justify it; which — though with more matters to be noted here than I have room for I shall accordingly proceed to do.

Yet I must first make a brave face, no doubt, and present in its native humility my scant but quite ponderable germ. The seed sprouted in that vast nursery of sharp appeals and concrete images which calls itself, for blest convenience, London; it fell even into the order of the minor "social phenomena" with which, as fruit for the observer, that mightiest of the trees of suggestion bristles. It was not, no doubt, a fine purple peach, but it might pass for a round ripe plum, the note one had inevitably had to take of the difference made in certain friendly houses and for certain flourishing mothers by the sometimes dreaded, often delayed, but never fully arrested coming to the forefront of some vague slip of a daughter. For such mild revolutions as these not, to one's imagination, to remain mild one had had, I dare say, to be infinitely addicted to "noticing"; under the rule of that secret vice or that unfair advantage, at any rate, the "sitting downstairs," from a given date, of the merciless maiden previously perched aloft could easily be felt as a crisis. This crisis, and the sense for it in those whom it most concerns, has to confess itself courageously the prime propulsive force of "The Awkward Age." Such a matter might well make a scant show for a "thick book," and no thick book, but just a quite charmingly thin one, was in fact originally dreamt of. For its proposed scale the little idea seemed happy — happy, that is, above all in having come very straight; but its proposed scale was the limit of a small square canvas. One had been present again and again at the exhibition I refer to — which is what I mean by the "coming straight" of this particular London impression; yet one was (and through fallibilities that after all had their sweetness, so that one would on the whole rather have kept them than parted with them) still capable of so false a measurement. When I think indeed of those of my many false measurements that have resulted, after much anguish, in decent symmetries, I find the whole case, I profess, a theme for the philosopher. The little ideas one wouldn't have treated save for the design of keeping them small, the developed situations that one would never with malice prepense have undertaken, the long stories that had thoroughly meant to be short, the short subjects that had underhandedly plotted to be long, the hypocrisy of modest beginnings, the

audacity of misplaced middles, the triumph of intentions never entertained — with these patches, as I look about, I see my experience paved: an experience to which nothing is wanting save, I confess, some grasp of its final lesson.

This lesson would, if operative, surely provide some law for the recognition, the determination in advance, of the just limits and the just extent of the situation, ANY situation, that appeals, and that yet, by the presumable, the helpful law of situations, must have its reserves as well as its promises. The storyteller considers it because it promises, and undertakes it, often, just because also making out, as he believes, where the promise conveniently drops. The promise, for instance, of the case I have just named, the case of the account to be taken, in a circle of free talk, of a new and innocent, a wholly unacclimatised presence, as to which such accommodations have never had to come up, might well have appeared as limited as it was lively; and if these pages were not before us to register my illusion I should never have made a braver claim for it. They themselves admonish me, however, in fifty interesting ways, and they especially emphasise that truth of the vanity of the a priori test of what an idee-mere may have to give. The truth is that what a happy thought has to give depends immensely on the general turn of the mind capable of it, and on the fact that its loyal entertainer, cultivating fondly its possible relations and extensions, the bright efflorescence latent in it, but having to take other things in their order too, is terribly at the mercy of his mind. That organ has only to exhale, in its degree, a fostering tropic air in order to produce complications almost beyond reckoning. The trap laid for his superficial convenience resides in the fact that, though the relations of a human figure or a social occurrence are what make such objects interesting, they also make them, to the same tune, difficult to isolate, to surround with the sharp black line, to frame in the square, the circle, the charming oval, that helps any arrangement of objects to become a picture. The storyteller has but to have been condemned by nature to a liberally amused and beguiled, a richly sophisticated, view of relations and a fine inquisitive speculative sense for them, to find himself at moments flounder in a deep warm jungle. These are the moments at which he recalls ruefully that the great merit of such and such a small case, the merit for his particular advised use, had been precisely in the smallness.

I may say at once that this had seemed to me, under the first flush of recognition, the good mark for the pretty notion of the "free circle" put about by having, of a sudden, an ingenuous mind and a pair of limpid searching eyes to count with. Half the attraction was in the current actuality of the thing: repeatedly, right and left, as I have said, one had seen such a drama constituted, and always to the effect of proposing to the interested view one of those questions that are of the essence of drama: what will happen, who suffer, who not suffer, what turn be determined, what crisis created, what issue found? There had of course to be, as a basis, the free circle, but this was material of that admirable order with which the good London never leaves its true lover and believer long unprovided. One could count them on one's fingers (an abundant allowance), the liberal firesides beyond the wide glow of which, in a comparative dimness, female adolescence hovered and waited. The wide glow was bright, was favourable to "real" talk, to play of mind, to an explicit interest in life, a due demonstration of the interest by persons I qualified to feel it: all of which meant frankness and ease, the perfection, almost, as it were, of intercourse, and a tone as far as possible removed from that of the nursery and the schoolroom — as far as possible removed even, no doubt, in its appealing "modernity," from that of supposedly privileged scenes of conversation twenty years ago. The charm was, with a hundred other things, in the freedom — the freedom menaced by the inevitable irruption of the ingenuous mind; whereby, if the freedom should be sacrificed, what would truly BECOME of the charm? The charm might be figured as dear to members of the circle consciously contributing to it, but it was none the less true that some sacrifice in some quarter would have to be made, and what meditator worth his salt could fail to hold his breath while waiting on the event? The ingenuous mind might, it was true, be suppressed altogether, the general disconcertment averted either by some master-stroke of diplomacy or some rude simplification; yet these were ugly matters, and in the examples before one's eyes nothing ugly, nothing harsh or crude, had flourished. A girl might be married off the day after her irruption, or better still the day before it, to remove her from the sphere of the play of mind; but these were exactly not crudities, and even then, at the worst, an interval had to be bridged. "The Awkward Age" is precisely a study of one of these curtailed or extended periods of tension and apprehension, an account of the manner in which the resented interference with ancient liberties came to be in a particular instance dealt with.

I note once again that I had not escaped seeing it actually and traceably dealt with — (I admit) a good deal of friendly suspense; also with the nature and degree of the "sacrifice" left very much to one's appreciation.

In circles highly civilised the great things, the real things, the hard, the cruel and even the tender things, the true elements of any tension and true facts of any crisis, have ever, for the outsider's, for the critic's use, to be translated into terms — terms in the distinguished name of which, terms for the right employment of which, more than one situation of the type I glance at had struck me as all irresistibly appealing. There appeared in fact at moments no end to the things they said, the suggestions into which they flowered; one of these latter in especial arriving at the highest intensity. Putting vividly before one the perfect system on which the awkward age is handled in most other European societies, it threw again into relief the inveterate English trick of the so morally well-meant and so intellectually helpless compromise. We live notoriously, as I suppose every age lives, in an "epoch of transition"; but it may still be said of the French for instance, I assume, that their social scheme absolutely provides against awkwardness. That is it would be, by this scheme, so infinitely awkward, so awkward beyond any patching-up, for the hovering female young to be conceived as present at "good" talk, that their presence is, theoretically at least, not permitted till their youth has been promptly corrected by marriage — in which case they have ceased to be merely young. The better the talk prevailing in any circle, accordingly, the more organised, the more complete, the element of precaution and exclusion. Talk — giving the term a wide application — is one thing, and a proper inexperience another; and it has never occurred to a logical people that the interest of the greater, the general, need be sacrificed to that of the less, the particular. Such sacrifices strike them as gratuitous and barbarous, as cruel above all to the social intelligence; also as perfectly preventable by wise arrangement. Nothing comes home more, on the other hand, to the observer of English manners than the very moderate degree in which wise arrangement, in the French sense of a scientific economy, has ever been invoked; a fact indeed largely explaining the great interest of their incoherence, their heterogeneity, their wild abundance. The French, all analytically, have conceived of fifty different proprieties, meeting fifty different cases, whereas the English mind, less intensely at work, has never conceived but of one — the grand propriety, for every case, it should in fairness be said, of just being English. As practice, however, has always to be a looser thing than theory, so no application of that rigour has been possible in the London world without a thousand departures from the grim ideal.

The American theory, if I may "drag it in," would be, I think, that talk should never become "better" than the female young, either actually or constructively present, are minded to allow it. THAT system involves as little compromise as the French; it has been absolutely simple, and the beauty of its success shines out in every record of our conditions of intercourse — premising always our "basic" assumption that the female young read the newspapers. The English theory may be in itself almost as simple, but different and much more complex forces have ruled the application of it; so much does the goodness of talk depend on what there may be to talk about. There are more things in London, I think, than anywhere in the world; hence the charm of the dramatic struggle reflected in my book, the struggle somehow to fit propriety into a smooth general case which is really all the while bristling and crumbling into fierce particular ones. The circle surrounding Mrs. Brookenham, in my pages, is of course nothing if not a particular, even a "peculiar" one — and its rather vain effort (the vanity, the real inexpertness, being precisely part of my tale) is toward the courage of that condition. It has cropped up in a social order where individual appreciations of propriety have not been formally allowed for, in spite of their having very often quite rudely and violently and insolently, rather of course than insidiously, flourished; so that as the matter stands, rightly or wrongly, Nanda's retarded, but eventually none the less real, incorporation means virtually Nanda's exposure. It means this, that is, and many things beside — means them for Nanda herself and, with a various intensity, for the other participants in the action; but what it particularly means, surely, is the failure of successful arrangement and the very moral, sharply pointed, of the fruits of compromise. It is compromise that has suffered her to be in question at all, and that has condemned the freedom of the circle to be self-conscious, compunctious, on the whole much more timid than brave — the consequent muddle, if the term be not too gross, representing meanwhile a great inconvenience for life, but, as I found myself feeling, an immense promise, a much greater one than on the "foreign" showing, for the painted picture of life. Beyond which let me add that here immediately is a prime specimen of the way in which the obscurer, the lurking relations of a motive apparently simple, always in wait for their spring, may by seizing their chance for it send simplicity flying. Poor Nanda's little case, and her mother's, and Mr. Longdon's and Vanderbank's and Mitchy's, to say nothing of that of the others, has only to catch a reflected light from over the Channel in order to double at once its appeal to the imagination. (I am considering all these matters, I need scarce say, only as they are concerned with that faculty. With a relation NOT imaginative to his material the storyteller has nothing whatever to do.)

It exactly happened moreover that my own material here was to profit in a particular way by that extension of view. My idea was to be treated with light irony — it would be light and ironical or it would be nothing; so that I asked myself, naturally, what might be the least solemn form to give it, among recognised and familiar forms. The question thus at once arose: What form so familiar, so recognised among alert readers, as that in which the ingenious and inexhaustible, the charming philosophic "Gyp" casts most of her social studies? Gyp had long struck me as mistress, in her levity, of one of the happiest of forms — the only objection to my use of which was a certain extraordinary benightedness on the part of the Anglo-Saxon reader. One had noted this reader as perverse and inconsequent in respect to the absorption of "dialogue" — observed the "public for fiction" consume it, in certain connexions, on the scale and with the smack of lips that mark the consumption of bread-and-jam by a children's school-feast, consume it even at the theatre, so far as our theatre ever vouchsafes it, and yet as flagrantly reject it when served, so to speak, au naturel. One had seen good solid slices of fiction, well endued, one might surely have thought, with this easiest of lubrications, deplored by editor and publisher as positively not, for the general gullet as known to THEM, made adequately "slick." "'Dialogue,' always 'dialogue'!" I had seemed from far back to hear them mostly cry: "We can't have too much of it, we can't have enough of it, and no excess of it, in the form of no matter what savourless dilution, or what boneless dispersion, ever began to injure a book so much as even the very scantest claim put in for form and substance." This wisdom had always been in one's ears; but it had at the same time been equally in one's eyes that really constructive dialogue, dialogue organic and dramatic, speaking for itself, representing and embodying substance and form, is among us an uncanny and abhorrent thing, not to be dealt with on any terms. A comedy or a tragedy may run for a thousand nights without prompting twenty persons in London or in New York to desire that view of its text which is so desired in Paris, as soon as a play begins to loom at all large, that the number of copies of the printed piece in circulation far exceeds at last the number of performances. But as with the printed piece our own public, infatuated as it may be with the theatre, refuses all commerce — though indeed this can't but be, without cynicism, very much through the infirmity the piece, IF printed, would reveal — so the same horror seems to attach to any typographic hint of the proscribed playbook or any insidious plea for it. The immense oddity resides in the almost exclusively typographic order of the offence. An English, an American Gyp would typographically offend, and that would be the end of her. THERE gloomed at me my warning, as well as shone at me my provocation, in respect to the example of this delightful writer. I might emulate her, since I presumptuously would, but dishonour would await me if, proposing to treat the different faces of my subject in the most completely instituted colloquial form, I should evoke the figure and affirm the presence of participants by the repeated and prefixed name rather than by the recurrent and affixed "said he" and "said she." All I have space to go into here — much as the funny fact I refer to might seem to invite us to dance hand in hand round it — is that I was at any rate duly admonished, that I took my measures accordingly, and that the manner in which I took them has lived again for me ever so arrestingly, so amusingly, on re-examination of the book.

But that I did, positively and seriously — ah so seriously! — emulate the levity of Gyp and, by the same token, of that hardiest of flowers fostered in her school, M. Henri Lavedan, is a contribution to the history of "The Awkward Age" that I shall obviously have had to brace myself in order to make. Vivid enough to me the expression of face of any kindest of critics, even, moved to declare that he would never in the least have suspected it. Let me say at once, in extenuation of the too respectful distance at which I may thus have appeared to follow my model, that my first care HAD to be the covering of my tracks — lest I truly should be caught in the act of arranging, of organising dialogue to "speak for itself." What I now see to have happened is that I organised and arranged but too well — too well, I mean, for any betrayal of the Gyp taint, however faded and feeble. The trouble appears to have been that while I on the one hand exorcised the baleful association, I succeeded in rousing on nobody's part a sense of any other association whatever, or of my having cast myself into any conceivable or calculable form. My private inspiration had been in the Gyp plan (artfully dissimulated, for dear life, and applied with the very subtlest consistency, but none the less kept in secret view); yet I was to fail to make out in the event that the book succeeded in producing the impression of ANY plan on any person. No hint of that sort of success, or of any critical perception at all in relation to the business, has ever come my way; in spite of which when I speak, as just above, of what was to "happen" under the law of my ingenious labour, I fairly lose myself in the vision of a hundred bright phenomena. Some of these incidents I must treat myself to naming, for they are among the best I shall have on any occasion to retail. But I must first give the measure of the degree in which they were mere matters of the study. This

composition had originally appeared in “Harper’s Weekly” during the autumn of 1898 and the first weeks of the winter, and the volume containing it was published that spring. I had meanwhile been absent from England, and it was not till my return, some time later, that I had from my publisher any news of our venture. But the news then met at a stroke all my curiosity: “I’m sorry to say the book has done nothing to speak of; I’ve never in all my experience seen one treated with more general and complete disrespect.” There was thus to be nothing left me for fond subsequent reference — of which I doubtless give even now so adequate an illustration — save the rich reward of the singular interest attaching to the very intimacies of the effort.

It comes back to me, the whole “job,” as wonderfully amusing and delightfully difficult from the first; since amusement deeply abides, I think, in any artistic attempt the basis and groundwork of which are conscious of a particular firmness. On that hard fine floor the element of execution feels it may more or less confidently DANCE; in which case puzzling questions, sharp obstacles, dangers of detail, may come up for it by the dozen without breaking its heart or shaking its nerve. It is the difficulty produced by the loose foundation or the vague scheme that breaks the heart — when a luckless fatuity has over-persuaded an author of the “saving” virtue of treatment. Being “treated” is never, in a workable idea, a mere passive condition, and I hold no subject ever susceptible of help that isn’t, like the embarrassed man of our proverbial wisdom, first of all able to help itself. I was thus to have here an envious glimpse, in carrying my design through, of that artistic rage and that artistic felicity which I have ever supposed to be intensest and highest, the confidence of the dramatist strong in the sense of his postulate. The dramatist has verily to BUILD, is committed to architecture, to construction at any cost; to driving in deep his vertical supports and laying across and firmly fixing his horizontal, his resting pieces — at the risk of no matter what vibration from the tap of his master-hammer. This makes the active value of his basis immense, enabling him, with his flanks protected, to advance undistractedly, even if not at all carelessly, into the comparative fairy-land of the mere minor anxiety. In other words his scheme HOLDS, and as he feels this in spite of noted strains and under repeated tests, so he keeps his face to the day. I rejoiced, by that same token, to feel MY scheme hold, and even a little ruefully watched it give me much more than I had ventured to hope. For I promptly found my conceived arrangement of my material open the door wide to ingenuity. I remember that in sketching my project for the conductors of the periodical I have named I drew on a sheet of paper — and possibly with an effect of the cabalistic, it now comes over me, that even anxious amplification may have but vainly attenuated — the neat figure of a circle consisting of a number of small rounds disposed at equal distance about a central object. The central object was my situation, my subject in itself, to which the thing would owe its title, and the small rounds represented so many distinct lamps, as I liked to call them, the function of each of which would be to light with all due intensity one of its aspects. I had divided it, didn’t they see? into aspects — uncanny as the little term might sound (though not for a moment did I suggest we should use it for the public), and by that sign we would conquer.

They “saw,” all genially and generously — for I must add that I had made, to the best of my recollection, no morbid scruple of not blabbing about Gyp and her strange incitement. I the more boldly held my tongue over this that the more I, by my intelligence, lived in my arrangement and moved about in it, the more I sank into satisfaction. It was clearly to work to a charm and, during this process — by calling at every step for an exquisite management— “to haunt, to startle and waylay.” Each of my “lamps” would be the light of a single “social occasion” in the history and intercourse of the characters concerned, and would bring out to the full the latent colour of the scene in question and cause it to illustrate, to the last drop, its bearing on my theme. I revelled in this notion of the Occasion as a thing by itself, really and completely a scenic thing, and could scarce name it, while crouching amid the thick arcana of my plan, with a large enough O. The beauty of the conception was in this approximation of the respective divisions of my form to the successive Acts of a Play — as to which it was more than ever a case for charmed capitals. The divine distinction of the act of a play — and a greater than any other it easily succeeds in arriving at — was, I reasoned, in its special, its guarded objectivity. This objectivity, in turn, when achieving its ideal, came from the imposed absence of that “going behind,” to compass explanations and amplifications, to drag out odds and ends from the “mere” storyteller’s great property-shop of aids to illusion: a resource under denial of which it was equally perplexing and delightful, for a change, to proceed. Everything, for that matter, becomes interesting from the moment it has closely to consider, for full effect positively to bestride, the law of its kind. “Kinds” are the very life of literature, and truth and strength come from the complete recognition of them, from abounding to the utmost in their respective senses and sinking deep into their consistency. I myself have scarcely to plead the cause of

"going behind," which is right and beautiful and fruitful in its place and order; but as the confusion of kinds is the inelegance of letters and the stultification of values, so to renounce that line utterly and do something quite different instead may become in another connexion the true course and the vehicle of effect. Something in the very nature, in the fine rigour, of this special sacrifice (which is capable of affecting the form-lover, I think, as really more of a projected form than any other) lends it moreover a coercive charm; a charm that grows in proportion as the appeal to it tests and stretches and strains it, puts it powerfully to the touch. To make the presented occasion tell all its story itself, remain shut up in its own presence and yet on that patch of staked-out ground become thoroughly interesting and remain thoroughly clear, is a process not remarkable, no doubt, so long as a very light weight is laid on it, but difficult enough to challenge and inspire great adroitness so soon as the elements to be dealt with begin at all to "size up."

The disdainers of the contemporary drama deny, obviously, with all promptness, that the matter to be expressed by its means — richly and successfully expressed that is — CAN loom with any largeness; since from the moment it does one of the conditions breaks down. The process simply collapses under pressure, they contend, proves its weakness as quickly as the office laid on it ceases to be simple. "Remember," they say to the dramatist, "that you have to be, supremely, three things: you have to be true to your form, you have to be interesting, you have to be clear. You have in other words to prove yourself adequate to taking a heavy weight. But we defy you really to conform to your conditions with any but a light one. Make the thing you have to convey, make the picture you have to paint, at all rich and complex, and you cease to be clear. Remain clear — and with the clearness required by the infantine intelligence of any public consenting to see a play — and what becomes of the 'importance' of your subject? If it's important by any other critical measure than the little foot-rule the 'produced' piece has to conform to, it is predestined to be a muddle. When it has escaped being a muddle the note it has succeeded in striking at the furthest will be recognised as one of those that are called high but by the courtesy, by the intellectual provinciality, of theatrical criticism, which, as we can see for ourselves any morning, is — well, an abyss even deeper than the theatre itself. Don't attempt to crush us with Dumas and Ibsen, for such values are from any informed and enlightened point of view, that is measured by other high values, literary, critical, philosophic, of the most moderate order. Ibsen and Dumas are precisely cases of men, men in their degree, in their poor theatrical straight-jacket, speculative, who have HAD to renounce the finer thing for the coarser, the thick, in short, for the thin and the curious for the self-evident. What earthly intellectual distinction, what 'prestige' of achievement, would have attached to the substance of such things as 'Denise,' as 'Monsieur Alphonse,' as 'Francillon' (and we take the Dumas of the supposedly subtler period) in any other form? What virtues of the same order would have attached to 'The Pillars of Society,' to 'An Enemy of the People,' to 'Ghosts,' to 'Rosmersholm' (or taking also Ibsen's 'subtler period') to 'John Gabriel Borkmann,' to 'The Master-Builder'? Ibsen is in fact wonderfully a case in point, since from the moment he's clear, from the moment he's 'amusing,' it's on the footing of a thesis as simple and superficial as that of 'A Doll's House' — while from the moment he's by apparent intention comprehensive and searching it's on the footing of an effect as confused and obscure as 'The Wild Duck.' From which you easily see ALL the conditions can't be met. The dramatist has to choose but those he's most capable of, and by that choice he's known."

So the objector concludes, and never surely without great profit from his having been "drawn." His apparent triumph — if it be even apparent — still leaves, it will be noted, convenient cover for retort in the riddled face of the opposite stronghold. The last word in these cases is for nobody who can't pretend to an ABSOLUTE test. The terms here used, obviously, are matters of appreciation, and there is no short cut to proof (luckily for us all round) either that "Monsieur Alphonse" develops itself on the highest plane of irony or that "Ghosts" simplifies almost to excruciation. If "John Gabriel Borkmann" is but a pennyworth of effect as to a character we can imagine much more amply presented, and if "Hedda Gabler" makes an appeal enfeebled by remarkable vagueness, there is by the nature of the case no catching the convinced, or call him the deluded, spectator or reader in the act of a mistake. He is to be caught at the worst in the act of attention, of the very greatest attention, and that is all, as a precious preliminary at least, that the playwright asks of him, besides being all the very divinest poet can get. I remember rejoicing as much to remark this, after getting launched in "The Awkward Age," as if I were in fact constructing a play — just as I may doubtless appear now not less anxious to keep the philosophy of the dramatist's course before me than if I belonged to his order. I felt, certainly, the support he feels, I participated in his technical amusement, I tasted to the full the bitter-sweetness of his draught — the beauty and the difficulty (to harp again on that string) of escaping

poverty EVEN THOUGH the references in one's action can only be, with intensity, to each other, to things exactly on the same plane of exhibition with themselves. Exhibition may mean in a "story" twenty different ways, fifty excursions, alternatives, excrescences, and the novel, as largely practised in English, is the perfect paradise of the loose end. The play consents to the logic of but one way, mathematically right, and with the loose end as gross an impertinence on its surface, and as grave a dishonour, as the dangle of a snippet of silk or wool on the right side of a tapestry. We are shut up wholly to cross-relations, relations all within the action itself; no part of which is related to anything but some other part — save of course by the relation of the total to life. And, after invoking the protection of Gyp, I saw the point of my game all in the problem of keeping these conditioned relations crystalline at the same time that I should, in emulation of life, consent to their being numerous and fine and characteristic of the London world (as the London world was in this quarter and that to be deciphered). All of which was to make in the event for complications.

I see now of course how far, with my complications, I got away from Gyp; but I see to-day so much else too that this particular deflexion from simplicity makes scarce a figure among the others after having once served its purpose, I mean, of lighting my original imitative innocence. For I recognise in especial, with a waking vibration of that interest in which, as I say, the plan of the book is embalmed for me, that my subject was probably condemned in advance to appreciable, or more exactly perhaps to almost preposterously appreciative, over-treatment. It places itself for me thus in a group of small productions exhibiting this perversity, representations of conceived cases in which my process has been to pump the case gaspingly dry, dry not only of superfluous moisture, but absolutely (for I have encountered the charge) of breathable air. I may note, in fine, that coming back to the pages before us with a strong impression of their recording, to my shame, that disaster, even to the extent of its disqualifying them for decent reappearance, I have found the adventure taking, to my relief, quite another turn, and have lost myself in the wonder of what "over-treatment" may, in the detail of its desperate ingenuity, consist of. The revived interest I speak of has been therefore that of following critically, from page to page, even as the red Indian tracks in the forest the pale-face, the footsteps of the systematic loyalty I was able to achieve. The amusement of this constatation is, as I have hinted, in the detail of the matter, and the detail is so dense, the texture of the figured and smoothed tapestry so loose, that the genius of Gyp herself, muse of general looseness, would certainly, once warned, have uttered the first disavowal of my homage. But what has occurred meanwhile is that this high consistency has itself, so to speak, constituted an exhibition, and that an important artistic truth has seemed to me thereby lighted. We brushed against that truth just now in our glance at the denial of expansibility to any idea the mould of the "stage-play" may hope to express without cracking and bursting — and we bear in mind at the same time that the picture of Nanda Brookenham's situation, though perhaps seeming to a careless eye so to wander and sprawl, yet presents itself on absolutely scenic lines, and that each of these scenes in itself, and each as related to each and to all of its companions, abides without a moment's deflexion by the principle of the stage-play. In doing this then it does more — it helps us ever so happily to see the grave distinction between substance and form in a really wrought work of art signally break down. I hold it impossible to say, before "The Awkward Age," where one of these elements ends and the other begins: I have been unable at least myself, on re-examination, to mark any such joint or seam, to see the two DISCHARGED offices as separate. They are separate before the fact, but the sacrament of execution indissolubly marries them, and the marriage, like any other marriage, has only to be a "true" one for the scandal of a breach not to show. The thing "done," artistically, is a fusion, or it has not BEEN done — in which case of course the artist may be, and all deservedly, pelted with any fragment of his botch the critic shall choose to pick up. But his ground once conquered, in this particular field, he knows nothing of fragments and may say in all security: "Detach one if you can. You can analyse in YOUR way, oh yes — to relate, to report, to explain; but you can't disintegrate my synthesis; you can't resolve the elements of my whole into different responsible agents or find your way at all (for your own fell purpose). My mixture has only to be perfect literally to bewilder you — you are lost in the tangle of the forest. Prove this value, this effect, in the air of the whole result, to be of my subject, and that other value, other effect, to be of my treatment, prove that I haven't so shaken them together as the conjurer I profess to be MUST consummately shake, and I consent but to parade as before a booth at the fair." The exemplary closeness of "The Awkward Age" even affects me, on re-perusal, I confess, as treasure quite instinctively and foreseeingly laid up against my present opportunity for these remarks. I have been positively struck by the quantity of meaning and the number of intentions, the extent of GROUND FOR INTEREST, as I may call it, that I have succeeded in working scenically, yet without loss of sharpness,

clearness or “atmosphere,” into each of my illuminating occasions — where, at certain junctures, the due preservation of all these values took, in the familiar phrase, a good deal of doing.

I should have liked just here to re-examine with the reader some of the positively most artful passages I have in mind — such as the hour of Mr. Longdon’s beautiful and, as it were, mystic attempt at a compact with Vanderbank, late at night, in the billiard-room of the country-house at which they are staying; such as the other nocturnal passage, under Mr. Longdon’s roof, between Vanderbank and Mitchy, where the conduct of so much fine meaning, so many flares of the exhibitory torch through the labyrinth of mere immediate appearances, mere familiar allusions, is successfully and safely effected; such as the whole array of the terms of presentation that are made to serve, all systematically, yet without a gap anywhere, for the presentation, throughout, of a Mitchy “subtle” no less than concrete and concrete no less than deprived of that officious explanation which we know as “going behind”; such as, briefly, the general service of co-ordination and vivification rendered, on lines of ferocious, of really quite heroic compression, by the picture of the assembled group at Mrs. Grendon’s, where the “cross-references” of the action are as thick as the green leaves of a garden, but none the less, as they have scenically to be, counted and disposed, weighted with responsibility. Were I minded to use in this connexion a “loud” word — and the critic in general hates loud words as a man of taste may hate loud colours — I should speak of the composition of the chapters entitled “Tishy Grendon,” with all the pieces of the game on the table together and each unconfusedly and contributively placed, as triumphantly scientific. I must properly remind myself, rather, that the better lesson of my retrospect would seem to be really a supreme revision of the question of what it may be for a subject to suffer, to call it suffering, by over-treatment. Bowed down so long by the inference that its product had in this case proved such a betrayal, my artistic conscience meets the relief of having to recognise truly here no traces of suffering. The thing carries itself to my maturer and gratified sense as with every symptom of soundness, an insolence of health and joy. And from this precisely I deduce my moral; which is to the effect that, since our only way, in general, of knowing that we have had too much of anything is by FEELING that too much: so, by the same token, when we don’t feel the excess (and I am contending, mind, that in “The Awkward Age” the multiplicity yields to the order) how do we know that the measure not recorded, the notch not reached, does represent adequacy or satiety? The mere feeling helps us for certain degrees of congestion, but for exact science, that is for the criticism of “fine” art, we want the notation. The notation, however, is what we lack, and the verdict of the mere feeling is liable to fluctuate. In other words an imputed defect is never, at the worst, disengageable, or other than matter for appreciation — to come back to my claim for that felicity of the dramatist’s case that his synthetic “whole” IS his form, the only one we have to do with. I like to profit in his company by the fact that if our art has certainly, for the impression it produces, to defer to the rise and fall, in the critical temperature, of the telltale mercury, it still hasn’t to reckon with the engraved thermometer-face.

HENRY JAMES.

BOOK FIRST. LADY JULIA

I

Save when it happened to rain Vanderbank always walked home, but he usually took a hansom when the rain was moderate and adopted the preference of the philosopher when it was heavy. On this occasion he therefore recognised as the servant opened the door a congruity between the weather and the "four-wheeler" that, in the empty street, under the glazed radiance, waited and trickled and blackly glittered. The butler mentioned it as on such a wild night the only thing they could get, and Vanderbank, having replied that it was exactly what would do best, prepared in the doorway to put up his umbrella and dash down to it. At this moment he heard his name pronounced from behind and on turning found himself joined by the elderly fellow guest with whom he had talked after dinner and about whom later on upstairs he had sounded his hostess. It was at present a clear question of how this amiable, this apparently unassertive person should get home — of the possibility of the other cab for which even now one of the footmen, with a whistle to his lips, craned out his head and listened through the storm. Mr. Longdon wondered to Vanderbank if their course might by any chance be the same; which led our young friend immediately to express a readiness to see him safely in any direction that should accommodate him. As the footman's whistle spent itself in vain they got together into the four-wheeler, where at the end of a few moments more Vanderbank became conscious of having proposed his own rooms as a wind-up to their drive. Wouldn't that be a better finish of the evening than just separating in the wet? He liked his new acquaintance, who struck him as in a manner clinging to him, who was staying at an hotel presumably at that hour dismal, and who, confessing with easy humility to a connexion positively timid with a club at which one couldn't have a visitor, accepted his invitation under pressure. Vanderbank, when they arrived, was amused at the air of added extravagance with which he said he would keep the cab: he so clearly enjoyed to that extent the sense of making a night of it. "You young men, I believe, keep them for hours, eh? At least they did in my time," he laughed— "the wild ones! But I think of them as all wild then. I dare say that when one settles in town one learns how to manage; only I'm afraid, you know, that I've got completely out of it. I do feel really quite mouldy. It's a matter of thirty years — !"

"Since you've been in London?"

"For more than a few days at a time, upon my honour. You won't understand that — any more, I dare say, than I myself quite understand how at the end of all I've accepted this queer view of the doom of coming back. But I don't doubt I shall ask you, if you'll be so good as to let me, for the help of a hint or two: as to how to do, don't you know? and not to — what do you fellows call it? — BE done. Now about one of THESE things — !"

One of these things was the lift in which, at no great pace and with much rumbling and creaking, the porter conveyed the two gentlemen to the alarming eminence, as Mr. Longdon measured their flight, at which Vanderbank perched. The impression made on him by this contrivance showed him as unsophisticated, yet when his companion, at the top, ushering him in, gave a touch to the quick light and, in the pleasant ruddy room, all convenience and character, had before the fire another look at him, it was not to catch in him any protrusive angle. Mr. Longdon was slight and neat, delicate of body and both keen and kind of face, with black brows finely marked and thick smooth hair in which the silver had deep shadows. He wore neither whisker nor moustache and seemed to carry in the flicker of his quick brown eyes and the positive sun-play of his smile even more than the equivalent of what might, superficially or stupidly, elsewhere be missed in him; which was mass, substance, presence — what is vulgarly called importance. He had indeed no presence but had somehow an effect. He might almost have been a priest if priests, as it occurred to Vanderbank, were ever such dandies. He had at all events conclusively doubled the Cape of the years — he would never again see fifty-five: to the warning light of that bleak headland he presented a back sufficiently conscious. Yet though to Vanderbank he couldn't look young he came near — strikingly and amusingly — looking new: this after a minute appeared mainly perhaps indeed in the perfection of his evening dress and the special smartness of the sleeveless overcoat he had evidently had made to wear with it and might even actually be wearing for the first time. He had talked to Vanderbank at Mrs. Brookenham's about Beccles and Suffolk; but it was not at Beccles nor anywhere in the county that these ornaments had been designed. His action had already been, with however little purpose, to present the region to his interlocutor in a favourable light. Vanderbank, for that matter, had the kind of imagination that likes to PLACE an object, even to the point of losing sight of it in the conditions; he already saw the nice old nook it must have taken to keep a man of intelligence so fresh while suffering him to remain so fine. The product of Beccles accepted at all events a cigarette — still much

as a joke and an adventure — and looked about him as if even more pleased than he expected. Then he broke, through his double eye-glass, into an exclamation that was like a passing pang of envy and regret. “You young men, you young men — !”

“Well, what about us?” Vanderbank’s tone encouraged the courtesy of the reference. “I’m not so young moreover as that comes to.”

“How old are you then, pray?”

“Why I’m thirty-four.”

“What do you call that? I’m a hundred and three!” Mr. Longdon at all events took out his watch. “It’s only a quarter past eleven.” Then with a quick change of interest, “What did you say is your public office?” he enquired.

“The General Audit. I’m Deputy Chairman.”

“Dear!” Mr. Longdon looked at him as if he had had fifty windows. “What a head you must have!”

“Oh yes — our head’s Sir Digby Dence.”

“And what do we do for you?”

“Well, you gild the pill — though not perhaps very thick. But it’s a decent berth.”

“A thing a good many fellows would give a pound of their flesh for?”

Vanderbank’s visitor appeared so to deprecate too faint a picture that he dropped all scruples. “I’m the most envied man I know — so that if I were a shade less amiable I should be one of the most hated.”

Mr. Longdon laughed, yet not quite as if they were joking. “I see. Your pleasant way carries it off.”

Vanderbank was, however, not serious. “Wouldn’t it carry off anything?”

Again his friend, through the pince-nez, appeared to crown him with a Whitehall cornice. “I think I ought to let you know I’m studying you. It’s really fair to tell you,” he continued with an earnestness not discomposed by the indulgence in Vanderbank’s face. “It’s all right — all right!” he reassuringly added, having meanwhile stopped before a photograph suspended on the wall. “That’s your mother!” he brought out with something of the elation of a child making a discovery or guessing a riddle. “I don’t make you out in her yet — in my recollection of her, which, as I told you, is perfect; but I dare say I soon shall.”

Vanderbank was more and more aware that the kind of amusement he excited would never in the least be a bar to affection. “Please take all your time.”

Mr. Longdon looked at his watch again. “Do you think I HAD better keep it?”

“The cab?” Vanderbank liked him so, found in him such a promise of pleasant things, that he was almost tempted to say: “Dear and delightful sir, don’t weigh that question; I’ll pay, myself, for the man’s whole night!” His approval at all events was complete.

“Most certainly. That’s the only way not to think of it.”

“Oh you young men, you young men!” his guest again murmured. He had passed on to the photograph — Vanderbank had many, too many photographs — of some other relation, and stood wiping the gold-mounted glasses through which he had been darting admirations and catching side-lights for shocks. “Don’t talk nonsense,” he continued as his friend attempted once more to throw in a protest; “I belong to a different period of history. There have been things this evening that have made me feel as if I had been disinterred — literally dug up from a long sleep. I assure you there have!” — he really pressed the point.

Vanderbank wondered a moment what things in particular these might be; he found himself wanting to get at everything his visitor represented, to enter into his consciousness and feel, as it were, on his side. He glanced with an intention freely sarcastic at an easy possibility. “The extraordinary vitality of Brookenham?”

Mr. Longdon, with nippers in place again, fixed on him a gravity that failed to prevent his discovering in the eyes behind them a shy reflexion of his irony. “Oh Brookenham! You must tell me all about Brookenham.”

“I see that’s not what you mean.”

Mr. Longdon forbore to deny it. “I wonder if you’ll understand what I mean.” Vanderbank bristled with the wish to be put to the test, but was checked before he could say so. “And what’s HIS place — Brookenham’s?”

“Oh Rivers and Lakes — an awfully good thing. He got it last year.”

Mr. Longdon — but not too grossly — wondered. “How did he get it?”

Vanderbank laughed. “Well, SHE got it.”

His friend remained grave. “And about how much now — ?”

"Oh twelve hundred — and lots of allowances and boats and things. To do the work!" Vanderbank, still with a certain levity, added.

"And what IS the work?"

The young man had a pause. "Ask HIM. He'll like to tell you."

"Yet he seemed to have but little to say." Mr. Longdon exactly measured it again.

"Ah not about that. Try him."

He looked more sharply at his host, as if vaguely suspicious of a trap; then not less vaguely he sighed. "Well, it's what I came up for — to try you all. But do they live on that?" he continued.

Vanderbank once more debated. "One doesn't quite know what they live on. But they've means — for it was just that fact, I remember, that showed Brookenham's getting the place wasn't a job. It was given, I mean, not to his mere domestic need, but to his notorious efficiency. He has a property — an ugly little place in Gloucestershire — which they sometimes let. His elder brother has the better one, but they make up an income."

Mr. Longdon for an instant lost himself. "Yes, I remember — one heard of those things at the time. And SHE must have had something."

"Yes indeed, she had something — and she always has her intense cleverness. She knows thoroughly how. They do it tremendously well."

"Tremendously well," Mr. Longdon intelligently echoed. "But a house in Buckingham Crescent, with the way they seem to have built through to all sorts of other places — ?"

"Oh they're all right," Vanderbank soothingly dropped.

"One likes to feel that of people with whom one has dined. There are four children?" his friend went on.

"The older boy, whom you saw and who in his way is a wonder, the older girl, whom you must see, and two youngsters, male and female, whom you mustn't."

There might by this time, in the growing interest of their talk, have been almost nothing too uncanny for Mr. Longdon to fear it. "You mean the youngsters are — unfortunate?"

"No — they're only, like all the modern young, I think, mysteries, terrible little baffling mysteries." Vanderbank had found amusement again — it flickered so from his friend's face that, really at moments to the point of alarm, his explanations deepened darkness. Then with more interest he harked back. "I know the thing you just mentioned — the thing that strikes you as odd." He produced his knowledge quite with elation. "The talk." Mr. Longdon on this only looked at him in silence and harder, but he went on with assurance: "Yes, the talk — for we do talk, I think." Still his guest left him without relief, only fixing him and his suggestion with a suspended judgement. Whatever the old man was on the point of saying, however, he disposed of in a curtailed murmur; he had already turned afresh to the series of portraits, and as he glanced at another Vanderbank spoke afresh.

"It was very interesting to me to hear from you there, when the ladies had left us, how many old threads you were prepared to pick up."

Mr. Longdon had paused. "I'm an old boy who remembers the mothers," he at last replied.

"Yes, you told me how well you remember Mrs. Brookenham's."

"Oh, oh!" — and he arrived at a new subject. "This must be your sister Mary."

"Yes; it's very bad, but as she's dead—"

"Dead? Dear, dear!"

"Oh long ago" — Vanderbank eased him off. "It's delightful of you," this informant went on, "to have known also such a lot of MY people."

Mr. Longdon turned from his contemplation with a visible effort. "I feel obliged to you for taking it so; it mightn't — one never knows — have amused you. As I told you there, the first thing I did was to ask Fernanda about the company; and when she mentioned your name I immediately said: 'Would he like me to speak to him?'"

"And what did Fernanda say?"

Mr. Longdon stared. "Do YOU call her Fernanda?"

Vanderbank felt ever so much more guilty than he would have expected. "You think it too much in the manner we just mentioned?"

His friend hesitated; then with a smile a trifle strange: "Pardon me; *I* didn't mention—"

"No, you didn't; and your scruple was magnificent. In point of fact," Vanderbank pursued, "I DON'T call

Mrs. Brookenham by her Christian name."

Mr. Longdon's clear eyes were searching. "Unless in speaking of her to others?" He seemed really to wish to know.

Vanderbank was but too ready to satisfy him. "I dare say we seem to you a vulgar lot of people. That's not the way, I can see, you speak of ladies at Beccles."

"Oh if you laugh at me — !" And his visitor turned off.

"Don't threaten me," said Vanderbank, "or I WILL send away the cab. Of course I know what you mean. It will be tremendously interesting to hear how the sort of thing we've fallen into — oh we HAVE fallen in! — strikes your fresh, your uncorrupted ear. Do have another cigarette. Sunk as I must appear to you it sometimes strikes even mine. But I'm not sure as regards Mrs. Brookenham, whom I've known a long time."

Mr. Longdon again took him up. "What do you people call a long time?"

Vanderbank considered. "Ah there you are! And now we're 'we people'! That's right — give it to us. I'm sure that in one way or another it's all earned. Well, I've known her ten years. But awfully well."

"What do you call awfully well?"

"We people?" Vanderbank's enquirer, with his continued restless observation, moving nearer, the young man had laid on his shoulder the lightest of friendly hands. "Don't you perhaps ask too much? But no," he added quickly and gaily, "of course you don't: if I don't look out I shall have exactly the effect on you I don't want. I dare say I don't know HOW well I know Mrs. Brookenham. Mustn't that sort of thing be put in a manner to the proof? What I meant to say just now was that I wouldn't — at least I hope I shouldn't — have named her as I did save to an old friend."

Mr. Longdon looked promptly satisfied and reassured. "You probably heard me address her myself."

"I did, but you've your rights, and that wouldn't excuse me. The only thing is that I go to see her every Sunday."

Mr. Longdon pondered and then, a little to Vanderbank's surprise, at any rate to his deeper amusement, candidly asked: "Only Fernanda? No other lady?"

"Oh yes, several other ladies."

Mr. Longdon appeared to hear this with pleasure. "You're quite right. We don't make enough of Sunday at Beccles."

"Oh we make plenty of it in London!" Vanderbank said. "And I think it's rather in my interest I should mention that Mrs. Brookenham calls ME—"

His visitor covered him now with an attention that just operated as a check. "By your Christian name?"

Before Vanderbank could in any degree attenuate "What IS your Christian name?" Mr. Longdon asked.

Vanderbank felt of a sudden almost guilty — as if his answer could only impute extravagance to the lady. "My Christian name" — he blushed it out— "is Gustavus."

His friend took a droll conscious leap. "And she calls you Gussy?"

"No, not even Gussy. But I scarcely think I ought to tell you," he pursued, "if she herself gave you no glimpse of the fact. Any implication that she consciously avoided it might make you see deeper depths."

He spoke with pointed levity, but his companion showed him after an instant a face just covered — and a little painfully — with the vision of the possibility brushed away by the joke. "Oh I'm not so bad as that!" Mr. Longdon modestly ejaculated.

"Well, she doesn't do it always," Vanderbank laughed, "and it's nothing moreover to what some people are called. Why, there was a fellow there—" He pulled up, however, and, thinking better of it, selected another instance. "The Duchess — weren't you introduced to the Duchess? — never calls me anything but 'Vanderbank' unless she calls me 'caro mio.' It wouldn't have taken much to make her appeal to YOU with an 'I say, Longdon!' I can quite hear her."

Mr. Longdon, focussing the effect of the sketch, pointed its moral with an indulgent: "Oh well, a FOREIGN duchess!" He could make his distinctions.

"Yes, she's invidiously, cruelly foreign," Vanderbank agreed: "I've never indeed seen a woman avail herself so cleverly, to make up for the obloquy of that state, of the benefits and immunities it brings with it. She has bloomed in the hot-house of her widowhood — she's a Neapolitan hatched by an incubator."

"A Neapolitan?" — Mr. Longdon seemed all civilly to wish he had only known it.

"Her husband was one; but I believe that dukes at Naples are as thick as princes at Petersburg. He's dead, at any rate, poor man, and she has come back here to live."

“Gloomily, I should think — after Naples?” Mr. Longdon threw out.

“Oh it would take more than even a Neapolitan past — ! However” — and the young man caught himself up— “she lives not in what’s behind her, but in what’s before — she lives in her precious little Aggie.”

“Little Aggie?” Mr. Longdon risked a cautious interest.

“I don’t take a liberty there,” Vanderbank smiled: “I speak only of the young Agnesina, a little girl, the Duchess’s niece, or rather I believe her husband’s, whom she has adopted — in the place of a daughter early lost — and has brought to England to marry.”

“Ah to some great man of course!”

Vanderbank thought. “I don’t know.” He gave a vague but expressive sigh. “She’s rather lovely, little Aggie.”

Mr. Longdon looked conspicuously subtle. “Then perhaps YOU’RE the man!”

“Do I look like a ‘great’ one?” Vanderbank broke in.

His visitor, turning away from him, again embraced the room. “Oh dear, yes!”

“Well then, to show how right you are, there’s the young lady.” He pointed to an object on one of the tables, a small photograph with a very wide border of something that looked like crimson fur.

Mr. Longdon took up the picture; he was serious now. “She’s very beautiful — but she’s not a little girl.”

“At Naples they develop early. She’s only seventeen or eighteen, I suppose; but I never know how old — or at least how young — girls are, and I’m not sure. An aunt, at any rate, has of course nothing to conceal. She IS extremely pretty — with extraordinary red hair and a complexion to match; great rarities I believe, in that race and latitude. She gave me the portrait — frame and all. The frame is Neapolitan enough and little Aggie’s charming.” Then Vanderbank subjoined: “But not so charming as little Nanda.”

“Little Nanda? — have you got HER?” The old man was all eagerness.

“She’s over there beside the lamp — also a present from the original.”

II

Mr. Longdon had gone to the place — little Nanda was in glazed white wood. He took her up and held her out; for a moment he said nothing, but presently, over his glasses, rested on his host a look intenser even than his scrutiny of the faded image. "Do they give their portraits now?"

"Little girls — innocent lambs? Surely — to old friends. Didn't they in your time?"

Mr. Longdon studied the portrait again; after which, with an exhalation of something between superiority and regret, "They never did to me," he returned.

"Well, you can have all you want now!" Vanderbank laughed.

His friend gave a slow droll headshake. "I don't want them 'now'!"

"You could do with them, my dear sir, still," Vanderbank continued in the same manner, "every bit *I* do!"

"I'm sure you do nothing you oughtn't." Mr. Longdon kept the photograph and continued to look at it. "Her mother told me about her — promised me I should see her next time."

"You must — she's a great friend of mine."

Mr. Longdon was really deep in it. "Is she clever?"

Vanderbank turned it over. "Well, you'll tell me if you think so."

"Ah with a child of seventeen — !" Mr. Longdon murmured it as if in dread of having to pronounce. "This one too IS seventeen?"

Vanderbank again considered. "Eighteen." He just hung fire once more, then brought out: "Well, call it nearly nineteen. I've kept her birthdays," he laughed.

His companion caught at the idea. "Upon my honour *I* should like to! When is the next?"

"You've plenty of time — the fifteenth of June."

"I'm only too sorry to wait." Laying down the object he had been examining Mr. Longdon took another turn about the room, and his manner was such an appeal to his host to accept his restlessness that as he circulated the latter watched him with encouragement. "I said to you just now that I knew the mothers, but it would have been more to the point to say the grandmothers." He stopped before his young friend, then nodded at the image of Nanda. "I knew HERS. She put it at something less."

Vanderbank rather failed to understand. "The old lady? Put what?"

Mr. Longdon's face showed him as for a moment feeling his way. "I'm speaking of Mrs. Brookenham. She spoke of her daughter as only sixteen."

Vanderbank's amusement at the tone of this broke out. "She usually does! She has done so, I think, for the last year or two."

His visitor dropped upon his sofa as with the weight of something sudden and fresh; then from this place, with a sharp little movement, tossed into the fire the end of a cigarette. Vanderbank offered him another, and as he accepted it and took a light he said: "I don't know what you're doing with me — I never at home smoke so much!" But he puffed away and, seated near, laid his hand on Vanderbank's arm as to help himself to utter something too delicate not to be guarded and yet too important not to be risked. "Now that's the sort of thing I did mean — as one of my impressions." Vanderbank continued at a loss and he went on: "I refer — if you don't mind my saying so — to what you said just now."

Vanderbank was conscious of a deep desire to draw from him whatever might come; so sensible was it somehow that whatever in him was good was also thoroughly personal. But our young friend had to think a minute. "I see, I see. Nothing's more probable than that I've said something nasty; but which of my particular horrors?"

"Well then, your conveying that she makes her daughter out younger — !"

"To make herself out the same?" Vanderbank took him straight up. "It was nasty my doing that? I see, I see. Yes, yes: I rather gave her away, and you're struck by it — as is most delightful you SHOULD be — because you're in every way of a better tradition and, knowing Mrs. Brookenham's my friend, can't conceive of one's playing on a friend a trick so vulgar and odious. It strikes you also probably as the kind of thing we must be constantly doing; it strikes you that right and left, probably, we keep giving each other away. Well, I dare say we do. Yes, 'come to think of it,' as they say in America, we do. But what shall I tell you? Practically we all know it and allow for it and it's as broad as it's long. What's London life after all? It's tit for tat!"

“Ah but what becomes of friendship?” Mr. Longdon earnestly and pleadingly asked, while he still held Vanderbank’s arm as if under the spell of the vivid explanation supplied him.

The young man met his eyes only the more sociably. “Friendship?”

“Friendship.” Mr. Longdon maintained the full value of the word.

“Well,” his companion risked, “I dare say it isn’t in London by any means what it is at Beccles. I quite literally mean that,” Vanderbank reassuringly added; “I never really have believed in the existence of friendship in big societies — in great towns and great crowds. It’s a plant that takes time and space and air; and London society is a huge ‘squash,’ as we elegantly call it — an elbowing pushing perspiring chattering mob.”

“Ah I don’t say THAT of you!” the visitor murmured with a withdrawal of his hand and a visible scruple for the sweeping concession he had evoked.

“Do say it then — for God’s sake; let some one say it, so that something or other, whatever it may be, may come of it! It’s impossible to say too much — it’s impossible to say enough. There isn’t anything any one can say that I won’t agree to.”

“That shows you really don’t care,” the old man returned with acuteness.

“Oh we’re past saving, if that’s what you mean!” Vanderbank laughed.

“You don’t care, you don’t care!” his guest repeated, “and — if I may be frank with you — I shouldn’t wonder if it were rather a pity.”

“A pity I don’t care?”

“You ought to, you ought to.” And Mr. Longdon paused. “May I say all I think?”

“I assure you *I* shall! You’re awfully interesting.”

“So are you, if you come to that. It’s just what I’ve had in my head. There’s something I seem to make out in you — !” He abruptly dropped this, however, going on in another way. “I remember the rest of you, but why did I never see YOU?”

“I must have been at school — at college. Perhaps you did know my brothers, elder and younger.”

“There was a boy with your mother at Malvern. I was near her there for three months in — what WAS the year?”

“Yes, I know,” Vanderbank replied while his guest tried to fix the date. “It was my brother Miles. He was awfully clever, but had no health, poor chap, and we lost him at seventeen. She used to take houses at such places with him — it was supposed to be for his benefit.”

Mr. Longdon listened with a visible recovery. “He used to talk to me — I remember he asked me questions I couldn’t answer and made me dreadfully ashamed. But I lent him books — partly, upon my honour, to make him think that as I had them I did know something. He read everything and had a lot to say about it. I used to tell your mother he had a great future.”

Vanderbank shook his head sadly and kindly. “So he had. And you remember Nancy, who was handsome and who was usually with them?” he went on.

Mr. Longdon looked so uncertain that he explained he meant his other sister; on which his companion said: “Oh her? Yes, she was charming — she evidently had a future too.”

“Well, she’s in the midst of her future now. She’s married.”

“And whom did she marry?”

“A fellow called Toovey. A man in the City.”

“Oh!” said Mr. Longdon a little blankly. Then as if to retrieve his blankness: “But why do you call her Nancy? Wasn’t her name Blanche?”

“Exactly — Blanche Bertha Vanderbank.”

Mr. Longdon looked half-mystified and half-distressed. “And now she’s Nancy Toovey?”

Vanderbank broke into laughter at his dismay. “That’s what every one calls her.”

“But why?”

“Nobody knows. You see you were right about her future.”

Mr. Longdon gave another of his soft smothered sighs; he had turned back again to the first photograph, which he looked at for a longer time. “Well, it wasn’t HER way.”

“My mother’s? No indeed. Oh my mother’s way — !” Vanderbank waited, then added gravely: “She was taken in time.”

Mr. Longdon turned half-round as to reply to this, but instead of replying proceeded afresh to an

examination of the expressive oval in the red plush frame. He took up little Aggie, who appeared to interest him, and abruptly observed: “Nanda isn’t so pretty.”

“No, not nearly. There’s a great question whether Nanda’s pretty at all.”

Mr. Longdon continued to inspect her more favoured friend; which led him after a moment to bring out: “She ought to be, you know. Her grandmother was.”

“Oh and her mother,” Vanderbank threw in. “Don’t you think Mrs. Brookenham lovely?”

Mr. Longdon kept him waiting a little. “Not so lovely as Lady Julia. Lady Julia had — !” He faltered; then, as if there were too much to say, disposed of the question. “Lady Julia had everything.”

Vanderbank gathered hence an impression that determined him more and more to diplomacy. “But isn’t that just what Mrs. Brookenham has?”

This time the old man was prompt. “Yes, she’s very brilliant, but it’s a totally different thing.” He laid little Aggie down and moved away as without a purpose; but his friend presently perceived his purpose to be another glance at the other young lady. As if all accidentally and absently he bent again over the portrait of Nanda. “Lady Julia was exquisite and this child’s exactly like her.”

Vanderbank, more and more conscious of something working in him, was more and more interested. “If Nanda’s so like her, WAS she so exquisite?”

“Oh yes; every one was agreed about that.” Mr. Longdon kept his eyes on the face, trying a little, Vanderbank even thought, to conceal his own. “She was one of the greatest beauties of her day.”

“Then IS Nanda so like her?” Vanderbank persisted, amused at his friend’s transparency.

“Extraordinarily. Her mother told me all about her.”

“Told you she’s as beautiful as her grandmother?”

Mr. Longdon turned it over. “Well, that she has just Lady Julia’s expression. She absolutely HAS it — I see it here.” He was delightfully positive. “She’s much more like the dead than like the living.”

Vanderbank saw in this too many deep things not to follow them up. One of these was, to begin with, that his guest had not more than half-succumbed to Mrs. Brookenham’s attraction, if indeed he had by a fine originality not resisted it altogether. That in itself, for an observer deeply versed in this lady, was attaching and beguiling. Another indication was that he found himself, in spite of such a break in the chain, distinctly predisposed to Nanda. “If she reproduces then so vividly Lady Julia,” the young man threw out, “why does she strike you as so much less pretty than her foreign friend there, who is after all by no means a prodigy?”

The subject of this address, with one of the photographs in his hand, glanced, while he reflected, at the other. Then with a subtlety that matched itself for the moment with Vanderbank’s: “You just told me yourself that the little foreign person—”

“Is ever so much the lovelier of the two? So I did. But you’ve promptly recognised it. It’s the first time,” Vanderbank went on, to let him down more gently, “that I’ve heard Mrs. Brookenham admit the girl’s good looks.”

“Her own girl’s? ‘Admit’ them?”

“I mean grant them to be even as good as they are. I myself, I must tell you, extremely like Nanda’s appearance. I think Lady Julia’s granddaughter has in her face, in spite of everything — !”

“What do you mean by everything?” Mr. Longdon broke in with such an approach to resentment that his host’s gaiety overflowed.

“You’ll see — when you do see. She has no features. No, not one,” Vanderbank inexorably pursued; “unless indeed you put it that she has two or three too many. What I was going to say was that she has in her expression all that’s charming in her nature. But beauty, in London” — and feeling that he held his visitor’s attention he gave himself the pleasure of freely presenting his idea— “staring glaring obvious knock-down beauty, as plain as a poster on a wall, an advertisement of soap or whiskey, something that speaks to the crowd and crosses the footlights, fetches such a price in the market that the absence of it, for a woman with a girl to marry, inspires endless terrors and constitutes for the wretched pair (to speak of mother and daughter alone) a sort of social bankruptcy. London doesn’t love the latent or the lurking, has neither time nor taste nor sense for anything less discernible than the red flag in front of the steam-roller. It wants cash over the counter and letters ten feet high. Therefore you see it’s all as yet rather a dark question for poor Nanda — a question that in a way quite occupies the foreground of her mother’s earnest little life. How WILL she look, what will be thought of her and what will she be able to do for herself? She’s at the age when the whole thing — speaking of her ‘attractions,’ her possible share of good looks — is still to a degree in a fog. But everything

depends on it."

Mr. Longdon had by this time come back to him. "Excuse my asking it again — for you take such jumps: what, once more, do you mean by everything?"

"Why naturally her marrying. Above all her marrying early."

Mr. Longdon stood before the sofa. "What do you mean by early?"

"Well, we do doubtless get up later than at Beccles; but that gives us, you see, shorter days. I mean in a couple of seasons. Soon enough," Vanderbank developed, "to limit the strain — !" He was moved to higher gaiety by his friend's expression.

"What do you mean by the strain?"

"Well, the complication of her being there."

"Being where?"

"You do put one through!" Vanderbank laughed. But he showed himself perfectly prepared. "Out of the school-room and where she is now. In her mother's drawing-room. At her mother's fireside."

Mr. Longdon stared. "But where else should she be?"

"At her husband's, don't you see?"

He looked as if he quite saw, yet was nevertheless not to be put off from his original challenge. "Ah certainly; but not as if she had been pushed down the chimney. All in good time."

"What do you call good time?"

"Why time to make herself loved."

Vanderbank wondered. "By the men who come to the house?"

Mr. Longdon slightly attenuated this way of putting it. "Yes — and in the home circle. Where's the 'strain' of her being suffered to be a member of it?"

III

Vanderbank at this left his corner of the sofa and, with his hands in his pockets and a manner so amused that it might have passed for excited, took several paces about the room while his interlocutor, watching him, waited for his response. That gentleman, as this response for a minute hung fire, took his turn at sitting down, and then Vanderbank stopped before him with a face in which something had been still more brightly kindled. "You ask me more things than I can tell you. You ask me more than I think you suspect. You must come and see me again — you must let me come and see you. You raise the most interesting questions and we must sooner or later have them all out."

Mr. Longdon looked happy in such a prospect, but once more took out his watch. "It wants five minutes to midnight. Which means that I must go now."

"Not in the least. There are satisfactions you too must give." His host, with an irresistible hand, confirmed him in his position and pressed upon him another cigarette. His resistance rang hollow — it was clearly, he judged, such an occasion for sacrifices. Vanderbank's view of it meanwhile was quite as marked. "You see there's ever so much more you must in common kindness tell me."

Mr. Longdon sat there like a shy singer invited to strike up. "I told you everything at Mrs. Brookenham's. It comes over me now how I dropped on you."

"What you told me," Vanderbank returned, "was excellent so far as it went; but it was only after all that, having caught my name, you had asked of our friend if I belonged to people you had known years before, and then, from what she had said, had — with what you were so good as to call great pleasure — made out that I did. You came round to me on this, after dinner, and gave me a pleasure still greater. But that only takes us part of the way." Mr. Longdon said nothing, but there was something appreciative in his conscious lapses; they were a tribute to his young friend's frequent felicity. This personage indeed appeared more and more to take them for that — which was not without its effect on his spirits. At last, with a flight of some freedom, he brought their pause to a close. "You loved Lady Julia." Then as the attitude of his guest, who serenely met his eyes, was practically a contribution to the subject, he went on with a feeling that he had positively pleased. "You lost her — and you're unmarried."

Mr. Longdon's smile was beautiful — it supplied so many meanings that when presently he spoke he seemed already to have told half his story. "Well, my life took a form. It had to, or I don't know what would have become of me, and several things that all happened at once helped me out. My father died — I came into the little place in Suffolk. My sister, my only one, who had married and was older than I, lost within a year or two both her husband and her little boy. I offered her, in the country, a home, for her trouble was greater than any trouble of mine. She came, she stayed; it went on and on and we lived there together. We were sorry for each other and it somehow suited us. But she died two years ago."

Vanderbank took all this in, only wishing to show — wishing by this time quite tenderly — that he even read into it deeply enough all the unsaid. He filled out another of his friend's gaps. "And here you are." Then he invited Mr. Longdon himself to make the stride. "Well, you'll be a great success."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, that we shall be so infatuated with you that we shall make your life a burden to you. You'll see soon enough what I mean by it."

"Possibly," the old man said; "to understand you I shall have to. You speak of something that as yet — with my race practically run — I know nothing about. I was no success as a young man. I mean of the sort that would have made most difference. People wouldn't look at me—"

"Well, WE shall look at you," Vanderbank declared. Then he added: "What people do you mean?" And before his friend could reply: "Lady Julia?"

Mr. Longdon's assent was mute. "Ah she was not the worst! I mean that what made it so bad," he continued, "was that they all really liked me. Your mother, I think — as to THAT, the dreadful consolatory 'liking' — even more than the others."

"My mother?" — Vanderbank was surprised. "You mean there was a question — ?"

"Oh for but half a minute! It didn't take her long. It was five years after your father's death."

This explanation was very delicately made. "She COULD marry again."

"And I suppose you know she did," Vanderbank returned.

"I knew it soon enough!" With this, abruptly, Mr. Longdon pulled himself forward. "Good-night, good-night."

"Good-night," said Vanderbank. "But wasn't that AFTER Lady Julia?"

On the edge of the sofa, his hands supporting him, Mr. Longdon looked straight. "There was nothing after Lady Julia."

"I see." His companion smiled. "My mother was earlier."

"She was extremely good to me. I'm not speaking of that time at Malvern — that came later."

"Precisely — I understand. You're speaking of the first years of her widowhood."

Mr. Longdon just faltered. "I should call them rather the last. Six months later came her second marriage."

Vanderbank's interest visibly improved. "Ah it was THEN? That was about my seventh year." He called things back and pieced them together. "But she must have been older than you."

"Yes — a little. She was kindness itself to me at all events, then and afterwards. That was the charm of the weeks at Malvern."

"I see," the young man laughed. "The charm was that you had recovered."

"Oh dear, no!" Mr. Longdon, rather to his mystification, exclaimed. "I'm afraid I hadn't recovered at all — hadn't, if that's what you mean, got over my misery and my melancholy. She knew I hadn't — and that was what was nice of her. She was a person with whom I could talk about her."

Vanderbank took a moment to clear up the ambiguity. "Oh you mean you could talk about the OTHER. You hadn't got over Lady Julia."

Mr. Longdon sadly smiled at him. "I haven't got over her yet!" Then, however, as if not to look morbid, he took pains to be clear. "The first wound was bad — but from that one always comes round. Your mother, dear woman, had known how to help me. Lady Julia was at that time her intimate friend — it was she who introduced me there. She couldn't help what happened — she did her best. What I meant just now was that in the aftertime, when opportunity occurred, she was the one person with whom I could always talk and who always understood." He lost himself an instant in the deep memories to attest which he had survived alone; then he sighed out as if the taste of it all came back to him with a faint sweetness: "I think they must both have been good to me. At the Malvern time, the particular time I just mentioned to you, Lady Julia was already married, and during those first years she had been whirled out of my ken. Then her own life took a quieter turn; we met again; I went for a good while often to her house. I think she rather liked the state to which she had reduced me, though she didn't, you know, in the least presume on it. The better a woman is — it has often struck me — the more she enjoys in a quiet way some fellow's having been rather bad, rather dark and desperate, about her — for her. I dare say, I mean, that though Lady Julia insisted I ought to marry she wouldn't really have liked it much if I had. At any rate it was in those years I saw her daughter just cease to be a child — the little girl who was to be transformed by time into the so different person with whom we dined to-night. That comes back to me when I hear you speak of the growing up, in turn, of that person's own daughter."

"I follow you with a sympathy — !" Vanderbank replied. "The situation's reproduced."

"Ah partly — not altogether. The things that are unlike — well, are so VERY unlike." Mr. Longdon for a moment, on this, fixed his companion with eyes that betrayed one of the restless little jumps of his mind. "I told you just now that there's something I seem to make out in you."

"Yes, that was meant for better things?" — Vanderbank frankly took him up. "There IS something, I really believe — meant for ever so much better ones. Those are just the sort I like to be supposed to have a real affinity with. Help me to them, Mr. Longdon; help me to them, and I don't know what I won't do for you!"

"Then after all" — and his friend made the point with innocent sharpness— "you're NOT past saving!"

"Well, I individually — how shall I put it to you? If I tell you," Vanderbank went on, "that I've that sort of fulcrum for salvation which consists at least in a deep consciousness and the absence of a rag of illusion, I shall appear to say I'm wholly different from the world I live in and to that extent present myself as superior and fatuous. Try me at any rate. Let me try myself. Don't abandon me. See what can be done with me. Perhaps I'm after all a case. I shall certainly cling to you."

"You're too clever — you're too clever: that's what's the matter with you all!" Mr. Longdon sighed.

"With us ALL?" Vanderbank echoed. "Dear Mr. Longdon, it's the first time I've heard it. If you should say the matter with ME in particular, why there might be something in it. What you mean at any rate — I see where you come out — is that we're cold and sarcastic and cynical, without the soft human spot. I think you

flatter us even while you attempt to warn; but what's extremely interesting at all events is that, as I gather, we made on you this evening, in a particular way, a collective impression — something in which our trifling varieties are merged." His visitor's face, at this, appeared to acknowledge his putting the case in perfection, so that he was encouraged to go on. "There was something particular with which you weren't altogether pleasantly struck."

Mr. Longdon, who decidedly changed colour easily, showed in his clear cheek the effect at once of feeling a finger on his fault and of admiring his companion's insight. But he accepted the situation. "I couldn't help noticing your tone."

"Do you mean its being so low?"

He had smiled at first but looked grave now. "Do you really want to know?"

"Just how you were affected? I assure you there's at this moment nothing I desire nearly so much."

"I'm no judge then," Mr. Longdon began; "I'm no critic; I'm no talker myself. I'm old-fashioned and narrow and ignorant. I've lived for years in a hole. I'm not a man of the world."

Vanderbank considered him with a benevolence, a geniality of approval, that he literally had to hold in check for fear of seeming to patronise. "There's not one of us who can touch you. You're delightful, you're wonderful, and I'm intensely curious to hear you," the young man pursued. "Were we absolutely odious?" Before his guest's puzzled, finally almost pained face, such an air of appreciating so much candour, yet of looking askance at so much freedom, he could only try to smooth the way and light the subject. "You see we don't in the least know where we are. We're lost — and you find us." Mr. Longdon, as he spoke, had prepared at last really to go, reaching the door with a manner that denoted, however, by no means so much satiety as an attention that felt itself positively too agitated. Vanderbank had helped him on with the Inverness cape and for an instant detained him by it. "Just tell me as a kindness. DO we talk—"

"Too freely?" Mr. Longdon, with his clear eyes so untouched by time, speculatively murmured.

"Too outrageously. I want the truth."

The truth evidently for Mr. Longdon was difficult to tell. "Well — it was certainly different."

"From you and Lady Julia? I see. Well, of course with time SOME change is natural, isn't it? But so different," Vanderbank pressed, "that you were really shocked?"

His visitor smiled at this, but the smile somehow made the face graver. "I think I was rather frightened. Good-night."

BOOK SECOND. LITTLE AGGIE

Mrs. Brookenham stopped on the threshold with the sharp surprise of the sight of her son, and there was disappointment, though rather of the afflicted than of the irritated sort, in the question that, slowly advancing, she launched at him. “If you’re still lolling about why did you tell me two hours ago that you were leaving immediately?”

Deep in a large brocaded chair with his little legs stuck out to the fire, he was so much at his ease that he was almost flat on his back. She had evidently roused him from sleep, and it took him a couple of minutes — during which, without again looking at him, she directly approached a beautiful old French secretary, a fine piece of the period of Louis Seize — to justify his presence. “I changed my mind. I couldn’t get off.”

“Do you mean to say you’re not going?”

“Well, I’m thinking it over. What’s a fellow to do?” He sat up a little, staring with conscious solemnity at the fire, and if it had been — as it was not — one of the annoyances she in general expected from him, she might have received the impression that his flush was the heat of liquor.

“He’s to keep out of the way,” she returned— “when he has led one so deeply to hope it.” There had been a bunch of keys dangling from the secretary, of which as she said these words Mrs. Brookenham took possession. Her air on observing them had promptly become that of having been in search of them, and a moment after she had passed across the room they were in her pocket. “If you don’t go what excuse will you give?”

“Do you mean to YOU, mummy?”

She stood before him and now dismally looked at him. “What’s the matter with you? What an extraordinary time to take a nap!”

He had fallen back in the chair, from the depths of which he met her eyes. “Why it’s just THE time, mummy. I did it on purpose. I can always go to sleep when I like. I assure you it sees one through things!”

She turned away with impatience and, glancing about the room, perceived on a small table of the same type as the secretary a somewhat massive book with the label of a circulating library, which she proceeded to pick up as for refuge from the impression made on her by her boy. He watched her do this and watched her then slightly pause at the wide window that, in Buckingham Crescent, commanded the prospect they had ramified rearward to enjoy; a medley of smoky brick and spotty stucco, of other undressed backs, of glass invidiously opaque, of roofs and chimney-pots and stables unnaturally near — one of the private pictures that in London, in select situations, run up, as the phrase is, the rent. There was no indication of value now, however, in the character conferred on the scene by a cold spring rain. The place had moreover a confessed out-of-season vacancy. She appeared to have determined on silence for the present mark of her relation with Harold, yet she soon failed to resist a sufficiently poor reason for breaking it. “Be so good as to get out of my chair.”

“What will you do for me,” he asked, “if I oblige you?”

He never moved — but as if only the more directly and intimately to meet her — and she stood again before the fire and sounded his strange little face. “I don’t know what it is, but you give me sometimes a kind of terror.”

“A terror, mamma?”

She found another place, sinking sadly down and opening her book, and the next moment he got up and came over to kiss her, on which she drew her cheek wearily aside. “You bore me quite to death,” she coldly said, “and I give you up to your fate.”

“What do you call my fate?”

“Oh something dreadful — if only by its being publicly ridiculous.” She turned vaguely the pages of her book. “You’re too selfish — too sickening.”

“Oh dear, dear!” he wonderingly whistled while he wandered back to the hearth-rug, on which, with his hands behind him, he lingered a while. He was small and had a slight stoop which somehow gave him character — character of the insidious sort carried out in the acuteness, difficult to trace to a source, of his smooth fair face, where the lines were all curves and the expression all needles. He had the voice of a man of forty and was dressed — as if markedly not for London — with an air of experience that seemed to match it. He pulled down his waistcoat, smoothing himself, feeling his neat hair and looking at his shoes.

"I took your five pounds. Also two of the sovereigns," he went on. "I left you two pound ten." His mother jerked up her head at this, facing him in dismay, and, immediately on her feet, passed back to the secretary. "It's quite as I say," he insisted; "you should have locked it BEFORE, don't you know? It grinned at me there with all its charming brasses, and what was I to do? Darling mummy, I COULDN'T start — that was the truth. I thought I should find something — I had noticed; and I do hope you'll let me keep it, because if you don't it's all up with me. I stopped over on purpose — on purpose, I mean, to tell you what I've done. Don't you call that a sense of honour? And now you only stand and glower at me."

Mrs. Brookenham was, in her forty-first year, still charmingly pretty, and the nearest approach she made at this moment to meeting her son's description of her was by looking beautifully desperate. She had about her the pure light of youth — would always have it; her head, her figure, her flexibility, her flickering colour, her lovely silly eyes, her natural quavering tone, all played together toward this effect by some trick that had never yet been exposed. It was at the same time remarkable that — at least in the bosom of her family — she rarely wore an appearance of gaiety less qualified than at the present juncture; she suggested for the most part the luxury, the novelty of woe, the excitement of strange sorrows and the cultivation of fine indifferences. This was her special sign — an innocence dimly tragic. It gave immense effect to her other resources. She opened the secretary with the key she had quickly found, then with the aid of another rattled out a small drawer; after which she pushed the drawer back, closing the whole thing. "You terrify me — you terrify me," she again said.

"How can you say that when you showed me just now how well you know me? Wasn't it just on account of what you thought I might do that you took out the keys as soon as you came in?" Harold's manner had a way of clearing up whenever he could talk of himself.

"You're too utterly disgusting — I shall speak to your father," with which, going to the chair he had given up, his mother sank down again with her heavy book. There was no anger, however, in her voice, and not even a harsh plaint; only a detached accepted disenchantment. Mrs. Brookenham's supreme rebellion against fate was just to show with the last frankness how much she was bored.

"No, darling mummy, you won't speak to my father — you'll do anything in the world rather than that," Harold replied, quite as if he were kindly explaining her to herself. "I thank you immensely for the charming way you take what I've done; it was because I had a conviction of that that I waited for you to know it. It was all very well to tell you I'd start on my visit — but how the deuce was I to start without a penny in the world? Don't you see that if you want me to go about you must really enter into my needs?"

"I wish to heaven you'd leave me — I wish to heaven you'd get out of the house," Mrs. Brookenham went on without looking up.

Harold took out his watch. "Well, mamma, now I AM ready: I wasn't in the least before. But it will be going forth, you know, quite to seek my fortune. For do you really think — I must have from you what you do think — that it will be all right for me?"

She fixed him at last with her pretty pathos. "You mean for you to go to Brander?"

"You know," he answered with his manner as of letting her see her own attitude, "you know you try to make me do things you wouldn't at all do yourself. At least I hope you wouldn't. And don't you see that if I so far oblige you I must at least be paid for it?"

His mother leaned back in her chair, gazed for a moment at the ceiling and then closed her eyes. "You ARE frightful," she said. "You're appalling."

"You're always wanting to get me out of the house," he continued; "I think you want to get us ALL out, for you manage to keep Nanda from showing even more than you do me. Don't you think your children good ENOUGH, mummy dear? At any rate it's as plain as possible that if you don't keep us at home you must keep us in other places. One can't live anywhere for nothing — it's all bosh that a fellow saves by staying with people. I don't know how it is for a lady, but a man's practically let in—"

"Do you know you kill me, Harold?" Mrs. Brookenham woefully interposed. But it was with the same remote melancholy that she asked in the next breath: "It wasn't an INVITATION — to Brander?"

"It's as I told you. She said she'd write, fixing a time; but she never did write."

"But if YOU wrote—"

"It comes to the same thing? DOES it? — that's the question. If on my note she didn't write — that's what I mean. Should one simply take it that one's wanted? I like to have these things FROM you, mother. I do, I believe, everything you say; but to feel safe and right I must just HAVE them. Any one WOULD want me,

eh?"

Mrs. Brookenham had opened her eyes, but she still attached them to the cornice. "If she hadn't wanted you she'd have written to keep you off. In a great house like that there's always room."

The young man watched her a moment. "How you DO like to tuck us in and then sit up yourself! What do you want to do, anyway? What ARE you up to, mummy?"

She rose at this, turning her eyes about the room as if from the extremity of martyrdom or the wistfulness of some deep thought. Yet when she spoke it was with a different expression, an expression that would have served for an observer as a marked illustration of that disconnectedness of her parts which frequently was laughable even to the degree of contributing to her social success. "You've spent then more than four pounds in five days. It was on Friday I gave them to you. What in the world do you suppose is going to become of me?"

Harold continued to look at her as if the question demanded some answer really helpful. "Do we live beyond our means?"

She now moved her gaze to the floor. "Will you PLEASE get away?"

"Anything to assist you. Only, if I SHOULD find I'm not wanted — ?"

She met his look after an instant, and the wan loveliness and vagueness of her own had never been greater. "BE wanted, and you won't find it. You're odious, but you're not a fool."

He put his arms about her now for farewell, and she submitted as if it was absolutely indifferent to her to whose bosom she was pressed. "You do, dearest," he laughed, "say such sweet things!" And with that he reached the door, on opening which he pulled up at a sound from below. "The Duchess! She's coming up."

Mrs. Brookenham looked quickly round the room, but she spoke with utter detachment. "Well, let her come."

"As I'd let her go. I take it as a happy sign SHE won't be at Brander." He stood with his hand on the knob; he had another quick appeal. "But after Tuesday?"

Mrs. Brookenham had passed half round the room with the glide that looked languid but that was really a remarkable form of activity, and had given a transforming touch, on sofa and chairs, to three or four crushed cushions. It was all with the hanging head of a broken lily. "You're to stay till the twelfth."

"But if I AM kicked out?"

It was as a broken lily that she considered it. "Then go to the Mangers."

"Happy thought! And shall I write?"

His mother raised a little more a window-blind. "No — I will."

"Delicious mummy!" And Harold blew her a kiss.

"Yes, rather" — she corrected herself. "Do write — from Brander. It's the sort of thing for the Mangers. Or even wire."

"Both?" the young man laughed. "Oh you duck!" he cried. "And from where will YOU let them have it?"

"From Pewbury," she replied without wincing. "I'll write on Sunday."

"Good. How d'ye do, Duchess?" — and Harold, before he disappeared, greeted with a rapid concentration of all the shades of familiarity a large high lady, the visitor he had announced, who rose in the doorway with the manner of a person used to arriving on thresholds very much as people arrive at stations — with the expectation of being "met."

II

"Good-bye. He's off," Mrs. Brookenham, who had remained quite on her own side of the room, explained to her friend.

"Where's he off to?" this friend enquired with a casual advance and a look not so much at her hostess as at the cushions just rearranged.

"Oh to some places. To Brander to-day."

"How he does run about!" And the Duchess, still with a glance hither and yon, sank upon the sofa to which she had made her way unaided. Mrs. Brookenham knew perfectly the meaning of this glance: she had but three or four comparatively good pieces, whereas the Duchess, rich with the spoils of Italy, had but three or four comparatively bad. This was the relation, as between intimate friends, that the Duchess visibly preferred, and it was quite groundless, in Buckingham Crescent, ever to enter the drawing-room with an expression suspicious of disloyalty. The Duchess was a woman who so cultivated her passions that she would have regarded it as disloyal to introduce there a new piece of furniture in an underhand way — that is without a full appeal to herself, the highest authority, and the consequent bestowal of opportunity to nip the mistake in the bud. Mrs. Brookenham had repeatedly asked herself where in the world she might have found the money to be disloyal. The Duchess's standard was of a height — ! It matched for that matter her other elements, which were wontedly conspicuous as usual as she sat there suggestive of early tea. She always suggested tea before the hour, and her friend always, but with so different a wistfulness, rang for it. "Who's to be at Brander?" she asked.

"I haven't the least idea — he didn't tell me. But they've always a lot of people."

"Oh I know — extraordinary mixtures. Has he been there before?"

Mrs. Brookenham thought. "Oh yes — if I remember — more than once. In fact her note — which he showed me, but which only mentioned 'some friends' — was a sort of appeal on the ground of something or other that had happened the last time."

The Duchess dealt with it. "She writes the most extraordinary notes."

"Well, this was nice, I thought," Mrs. Brookenham said— "from a woman of her age and her immense position to so young a man."

Again the Duchess reflected. "My dear, she's not an American and she's not on the stage. Aren't those what you call positions in this country? And she's also not a hundred."

"Yes, but Harold's a mere baby."

"Then he doesn't seem to want for nurses!" the Duchess replied. She smiled at her hostess. "Your children are like their mother — they're eternally young."

"Well, I'M not a hundred!" moaned Mrs. Brookenham as if she wished with dim perversity she were.

"Every one's at any rate awfully kind to Harold." She waited a moment to give her visitor the chance to pronounce that eminently natural, but no pronouncement came — nothing but the footman who had answered her ring and of whom she ordered tea. "And where did you say YOU'RE going?" she enquired after this.

"For Easter?" The Duchess achieved a direct encounter with her charming eyes — which was not in general an easy feat. "I didn't say I was going anywhere. I haven't of a sudden changed my habits. You know whether I leave my child — except in the sense of having left her an hour ago at Mr. Garlick's class in Modern Light Literature. I confess I'm a little nervous about the subjects and am going for her at five."

"And then where do you take her?"

"Home to her tea. Where should you think?"

Mrs. Brookenham declined, in connexion with the matter, any responsibility of thought; she did indeed much better by saying after a moment: "You ARE devoted!"

"Miss Merriman has her afternoon — I can't imagine what they do with their afternoons," the Duchess went on. "But she's to be back in the school-room at seven."

"And you have Aggie till then?"

"Till then," said the Duchess cheerfully. "You're off for Easter to — where is it?" she continued.

Mrs. Brookenham had received with no flush of betrayal the various discriminations thus conveyed by her visitor, and her only revenge for the moment was to look as sweetly resigned as if she really saw what was in them. Where were they going for Easter? She had to think an instant, but she brought it out. "Oh to Pewbury

— we've been engaged so long that I had forgotten. We go once a year — one does it for Edward."

"Ah you spoil him!" smiled the Duchess. "Who's to be there?"

"Oh the usual thing, I suppose. A lot of my lord's tiresome supporters."

"To pay his debt? Then why are you poor things asked?"

Mrs. Brookenham looked, on this, quite adorably — that is most wonderingly — grave. "How do I know, my dear Jane, why in the world we're ever asked anywhere? Fancy people wanting Edward!" she exhaled with stupefaction. "Yet we can never get off Pewbury."

"You're better for getting on, cara mia, than for getting off!" the Duchess blandly returned. She was a person of no small presence, filling her place, however, without ponderosity, with a massiveness indeed rather artfully kept in bounds. Her head, her chin, her shoulders were well aloft, but she had not abandoned the cultivation of a "figure" or any of the distinctively finer reasons for passing as a handsome woman. She was secretly at war moreover, in this endeavour, with a lurking no less than with a public foe, and thoroughly aware that if she didn't look well she might at times only, and quite dreadfully, look good. There were definite ways of escape, none of which she neglected and from the total of which, as she flattered herself, the air of distinction almost mathematically resulted. This air corresponded superficially with her acquired Calabrian sonorities, from her voluminous title down, but the colourless hair, the passionless forehead, the mild cheek and long lip of the British matron, the type that had set its trap for her earlier than any other, were elements difficult to deal with and were at moments all a sharp observer saw. The battle-ground then was the haunting danger of the bourgeois. She gave Mrs. Brookenham no time to resent her last note before enquiring if Nanda were to accompany the couple.

"Mercy mercy, no — she's not asked." Mrs. Brookenham, on Nanda's behalf, fairly radiated obscurity. "My children don't go where they're not asked."

"I never said they did, love," the Duchess returned. "But what then do you do with her?"

"If you mean socially" — Mrs. Brookenham looked as if there might be in some distant sphere, for which she almost yearned, a maternal opportunity very different from that— "if you mean socially, I don't do anything at all. I've never pretended to do anything. You know as well as I do, dear Jane, that I haven't begun yet." Jane's hostess now spoke as simply as an earnest anxious child. She gave a vague patient sigh. "I suppose I must begin!"

The Duchess remained for a little rather grimly silent. "How old is she — twenty?"

"Thirty!" said Mrs. Brookenham with distilled sweetness. Then with no transition of tone: "She has gone for a few days to Tishy Grendon."

"In the country?"

"She stays with her to-night in Hill Street. They go down together to-morrow. Why hasn't Aggie been?" Mrs. Brookenham went on.

The Duchess handsomely stared. "Been where?"

"Why here, to see Nanda."

"Here?" the Duchess echoed, fairly looking again about the room. "When is Nanda ever here?"

"Ah you know I've given her a room of her own — the sweetest little room in the world." Mrs. Brookenham never looked so comparatively hopeful as when obliged to explain. "She has everything there a girl can want."

"My dear woman," asked the Duchess, "has she sometimes her own mother?"

The men had now come in to place the tea-table, and it was the movements of the red-haired footman that Mrs. Brookenham followed. "You had better ask my child herself."

The Duchess was frank and jovial. "I would, I promise you, if I could get at her! But isn't that woman always with her?"

Mrs. Brookenham smoothed the little embroidered tea-cloth. "Do you call Tishy Grendon a woman?"

Again the Duchess had one of her pauses, which were indeed so frequent in her talks with this intimate that an auditor could sometimes wonder what particular form of relief they represented. They might have been a habit proceeding from the fear of undue impatience. If the Duchess had been as impatient with Mrs. Brookenham as she would possibly have seemed without them her frequent visits in the face of irritation would have had to be accounted for. "What do YOU call her?" she demanded.

"Why Nanda's best friend — if not her only one. That's the place I SHOULD have liked for Aggie," Mrs. Brookenham ever so graciously smiled.

The Duchess hereupon, going beyond her, gave way to free mirth. “My dear thing, you’re delightful. Aggie OR Tishy is a sweet thought. Since you’re so good as to ask why Aggie has fallen off you’ll excuse my telling you that you’ve just named the reason. You’ve known ever since we came to England what I feel about the proper persons — and the most improper — for her to meet. The Tishy Grendons are not a bit the proper.”

Mrs. Brookenham continued to assist a little in the preparations for tea. “Why not say at once, Jane” — and her tone, in its appeal, was almost infantine— “that you’ve come at last to placing even poor Nanda, for Aggie’s wonderful purpose, in the same impossible class?”

The Duchess took her time, but at last she accepted her duty. “Well, if you will have it. You know my ideas. If it isn’t my notion of the way to bring up a girl to give her up, in extreme youth, to an intimacy with a young married woman who’s both unhappy and silly, whose conversation has absolutely no limits, who says everything that comes into her head and talks to the poor child about God only knows what — if I should never dream of such an arrangement for my niece I can almost as little face the prospect of throwing her MUCH, don’t you see? with any young person exposed to such an association. It would be in the natural order certainly” — in spite of which natural order the Duchess made the point with but moderate emphasis— “that, since dear Edward is my cousin, Aggie should see at least as much of Nanda as of any other girl of their age. But what will you have? I must recognise the predicament I’m placed in by the more and more extraordinary development of English manners. Many things have altered, goodness knows, since I was Aggie’s age, but nothing’s so different as what you all do with your girls. It’s all a muddle, a compromise, a monstrosity, like everything else you produce; there’s nothing in it that goes on all-fours. *I* see but one consistent way, which is our fine old foreign way and which makes — in the upper classes, mind you, for it’s with them only I’m concerned — des femmes bien gracieuses. I allude to the immemorial custom of my husband’s race, which was good enough for his mother and his mother’s mother, for Aggie’s own, for his other sisters, for toutes ces dames. It would have been good enough for my child, as I call her — my dear husband called her HIS — if, not losing her parents, she had remained in her own country. She would have been brought up there under an anxious eye — that’s the great point; privately, carefully, tenderly, and with what she was NOT to learn — till the proper time — looked after quite as much as the rest. I can only go on with her in that spirit and make of her, under Providence, what I consider any young person of her condition, of her name, of her particular traditions, should be. Voila, ma chere. Should you put it to me whether I think you’re surrounding Nanda with any such security as that — well, I shouldn’t be able to help it if I offended you by an honest answer. What it comes to, simply stated, is that really she must choose between Aggie and Tishy. I’m afraid I should shock you were I to tell you what I should think of myself for packing MY child, all alone, off for a week with Mrs. Grendon.”

Mrs. Brookenham, who had many talents, had none perhaps that she oftener found useful than that of listening with the appearance of being fairly hypnotised. It was the way she listened to her housekeeper at their regular morning conference, and if the rejoinder ensuing upon it frequently appeared to have nothing to do with her manner this was a puzzle for her interlocutor alone. “Oh of course I know your theory, dear Jane, and I dare say it’s very charming and old-fashioned and, if you like, aristocratic, in a frowsy foolish old way — though even upon that, at the same time, there would be something too to be said. But I can only congratulate you on finding it more workable than there can be any question of MY finding it. If you’re all armed for the sacrifices you speak of I simply am not. I don’t think I’m quite a monster, but I don’t pretend to be a saint. I’m an English wife and an English mother — I live in the mixed English world. My daughter, at any rate, is just my daughter, I thank my stars, and one of a good English bunch: she’s not the unique niece of my dead Italian husband, nor doubtless either, in spite of her excellent birth, of a lineage, like Aggie’s, so very tremendous. I’ve my life to lead and she’s a part of it. Sugar?” she wound up on a still softer note as she handed the cup of tea.

“Never! Well, with ME” said the Duchess with spirit, “she would be all.”

“‘All’ is soon said! Life is composed of many things,” Mrs. Brookenham gently rang out— “of such mingled intertwisted strands!” Then still with the silver bell, “Don’t you really think Tishy nice?” she asked.

“I think little girls should live with little girls and young femmes du monde so immensely initiated should — well,” said the Duchess with a toss of her head, “let them alone. What do they want of them ‘at all at all’?”

“Well, my dear, if Tishy strikes you as ‘initiated’ all one can ask is ‘Initiated into what?’ I should as soon think of applying such a term to a little shivering shorn lamb. Is it your theory,” Mrs. Brookenham pursued,

“that our unfortunate unmarried daughters are to have no intelligent friends?”

“Unfortunate indeed,” cried the Duchess, “precisely BECAUSE they’re unmarried, and unmarried, if you don’t mind my saying so, a good deal because they’re unmarriageable. Men, after all, the nice ones — by which I mean the possible ones — are not on the lookout for little brides whose usual associates are so up to snuff. It’s not their idea that the girls they marry shall already have been pitchforked — by talk and contacts and visits and newspapers and by the way the poor creatures rush about and all the extraordinary things they do — quite into EVERYTHING. A girl’s most intelligent friend is her mother — or the relative acting as such. Perhaps you consider that Tishy takes your place!”

Mrs. Brookenham waited so long to say what she considered that before she next spoke the question appeared to have dropped. Then she only replied as if suddenly remembering her manners: “Won’t you eat something?” She indicated a particular plate. “One of the nice little round ones?” The Duchess appropriated a nice little round one and her hostess presently went on: “There’s one thing I mustn’t forget — don’t let us eat them ALL. I believe they’re what Lord Petherton really comes for.”

The Duchess finished her mouthful imperturbably before she took this up. “Does he come so often?”

Mrs. Brookenham might have been, for judicious candour, the Muse of History. “I don’t know what he calls it; but he said yesterday that he’d come today. I’ve had tea earlier for you,” she went on with her most melancholy kindness— “and he’s always late. But we mustn’t, between us, lick the platter clean.”

The Duchess entered very sufficiently into her companion’s tone. “Oh I don’t feel at all obliged to consider him, for he has not of late particularly put himself out for me. He has not been to see me since I don’t know when, and the last time he did come he brought Mr. Mitchett.”

“Here it was the other way round. It was Mr. Mitchett, the other year, who first brought Lord Petherton.”

“And who,” asked the Duchess, “had first brought Mr. Mitchett?”

Mrs. Brookenham, meeting her friend’s eyes, looked for an instant as if trying to recall. “I give it up. I muddle beginnings.”

“That doesn’t matter if you only MAKE them,” the Duchess smiled.

“No, does it?” To which Mrs. Brookenham added: “Did he bring Mr. Mitchett for Aggie?”

“If he did they’ll have been disappointed. Neither of them has seen, in my house, the tip of her nose.” The Duchess announced it with a pomp of pride.

“Ah but with your ideas that doesn’t prevent.”

“Prevent what?”

“Why what I suppose you call the pourparlers.”

“For Aggie’s hand? My dear,” said the Duchess, “I’m glad you do me the justice of feeling that I’m a person to take time by the forelock. It was not, as you seem to remember, with the sight of Mr. Mitchett that the question of Aggie’s hand began to occupy me. I should be ashamed of myself if it weren’t constantly before me and if I hadn’t my feelers out in more quarters than one. But I’ve not so much as thought of Mr. Mitchett — who, rich as he may be, is the son of a shoemaker and superlatively hideous — for a reason I don’t at all mind telling you. Don’t be outraged if I say that I’ve for a long time hoped you yourself would find the right use for him.” She paused — at present with a momentary failure of assurance, from which she rallied, however, to proceed with a burst of earnestness that was fairly noble. “Forgive me if I just tell you once for all how it strikes me, I’m stupefied at your not seeming to recognise either your interest or your duty. Oh I know you want to, but you appear to me — in your perfect good faith of course — utterly at sea. They’re one and the same thing, don’t you make out? your interest and your duty. Why isn’t it convincingly plain to you that the thing to do with Nanda is just to marry her — and to marry her soon? That’s the great thing — do it while you CAN. If you don’t want her downstairs — at which, let me say, I don’t in the least wonder — your remedy is to take the right alternative. Don’t send her to Tishy—”

“Send her to Mr. Mitchett?” Mrs. Brookenham unresentfully quavered. Her colour, during her visitor’s address had distinctly risen, but there was no irritation in her voice. “How do you know, Jane, that I don’t want her downstairs?”

The Duchess looked at her with an audacity confirmed by the absence from her face of everything but the plaintive. “There you are, with your eternal English false positions! J’aime, moi, les situations nettes — je rien comprends pas d’autres. It wouldn’t be to your honour — to that of your delicacy — that with your impossible house you SHOULD wish to plant your girl in your drawing-room. But such a way of keeping her out of it as throwing her into a worse — !”

"Well, Jane, you do say things to me!" Mrs. Brookenham blandly broke in. She had sunk back into her chair; her hands, in her lap pressed themselves together and her wan smile brought a tear into each of her eyes by the very effort to be brighter. It might have been guessed of her that she hated to seem to care, but that she had other dislikes too. "If one were to take up, you know, some of the things you say — !" And she positively sighed for the wealth of amusement at them of which her tears were the sign. Her friend could quite match her indifference. "Well, my child, TAKE them up; if you were to do that with them candidly, one by one, you would do really very much what I should like to bring you to. Do you see?" Mrs. Brookenham's failure to repudiate the vision appeared to suffice, and her visitor cheerfully took a further jump. "As much of Tishy as she wants — AFTER. But not before."

"After what?"

"Well — say after Mr. Mitchett. Mr. Mitchett won't take her after Mrs. Grendon."

"And what are your grounds for assuming that he'll take her at all?" Then as the Duchess hung fire a moment: "Have you got it by chance from Lord Petherton?"

The eyes of the two women met for a little on this, and there might have been a consequence of it in the manner of what came. "I've got it from not being a fool. Men, I repeat, like the girls they marry—"

"Oh I already know your old song! The way they like the girls they DON'T marry seems to be," Mrs. Brookenham mused, "what more immediately concerns us. You had better wait till you HAVE made Aggie's fortune perhaps — to be so sure of the working of your system. Pardon me, darling, if I don't take you for an example until you've a little more successfully become one. I know what the sort of men worth speaking of are not looking for. They ARE looking for smart safe sensible English girls."

The Duchess glanced at the clock. "What's Mr. Vanderbank looking for?"

Her companion appeared to oblige her by anxiously thinking. "Oh, HE, I'm afraid, poor dear — for nothing at all!"

The Duchess had taken off a glove to appease her appetite, and now, drawing it on, she smoothed it down. "I think he has his ideas."

"The same as yours?"

"Well, more like them than like yours."

"Ah perhaps then — for he and I," said Mrs. Brookenham, "don't agree, I feel, on two things in the world. So you think poor Mitchy," she went on, "who's the son of a shoemaker and who might be the grandson of a grasshopper, good enough for my child."

The Duchess appreciated for a moment the superior fit of her glove. "I look facts in the face. It's exactly what I'm doing for Aggie." Then she grew easy to extravagance. "What are you giving her?"

But Mrs. Brookenham took without wincing whatever, as between a masterful relative and an exposed frivolity, might have been the sting of it. "That you must ask Edward. I haven't the least idea."

"There you are again — the virtuous English mother! I've got Aggie's little fortune in an old stocking and I count it over every night. If you've no old stocking for Nanda there are worse fates than shoemakers and grasshoppers. Even WITH one, you know, I don't at all say that I should sniff at poor Mitchy. We must take what we can get and I shall be the first to take it. You can't have everything for ninepence." And the Duchess got up — shining, however, with a confessed light of fantasy. "Speak to him, my dear — speak to him!"

"Do you mean offer him my child?"

She laughed at the intonation. "There you are once more — vous autres! If you're shocked at the idea you place drolement your delicacy. I'd offer mine to the son of a chimney-sweep if the principal guarantees were there. Nanda's charming — you don't do her justice. I don't say Mr. Mitchett's either beautiful or noble, and he certainly hasn't as much distinction as would cover the point of a pin. He doesn't mind moreover what he says — the lengths he sometimes goes to! — but that," added the Duchess with decision, "is no doubt much a matter of how he finds you'll take it. And after marriage what does it signify? He has forty thousand a year, an excellent idea of how to take care of it and a good disposition."

Mrs. Brookenham sat still; she only looked up at her friend. "Is it by Lord Petherton that you know of his excellent idea?"

The Duchess showed she was challenged, but also that she made allowances. "I go by my impression. But Lord Petherton HAS spoken for him."

"He ought to do that," said Mrs. Brookenham— "since he wholly lives on him."

"Lord Petherton — on Mr. Mitchett?" The Duchess stared, but rather in amusement than in horror. "Why,

hasn't he a — property?"

"The loveliest. Mr. Mitchett's his property. Didn't you KNOW?" There was an artless wail in Mrs. Brookenham's surprise.

"How should I know — still a stranger as I'm often rather happy to feel myself here and choosing my friends and picking my steps very much, I can assure you — how should I know about all your social scandals and things?"

"Oh we don't call THAT a social scandal!" Mrs. Brookenham inimitably returned.

"Well, if you should wish to you'd have the way I tell you of to stop it. Divert the stream of Mr. Mitchett's wealth."

"Oh there's plenty for every one!" — Mrs. Brookenham kept up her tone. "He's always giving us things — bonbons and dinners and opera-boxes."

"He has never given ME any," the Duchess contentedly declared.

Mrs. Brookenham waited a little. "Lord Petherton has the giving of some. He has never in his life before, I imagine, made so many presents."

"Ah then it's a shame one has nothing!" On which before reaching the door, the Duchess changed the subject. "You say I never bring Aggie. If you like I'll bring her back."

Mrs. Brookenham wondered. "Do you mean today?"

"Yes, when I've picked her up. It will be something to do with her till Miss Merriman can take her."

"Delighted, dearest; do bring her. And I think she should SEE Mr. Mitchett."

"Shall I find him here too then?"

"Oh take the chance."

The two women, on this, exchanged, tacitly and across the room — the Duchess at the door, which a servant had arrived to open for her, and Mrs. Brookenham still at her tea-table — a further stroke of intercourse, over which the latter was not on this occasion the first to lower her lids. "I think I've shown high scruples," the departing guest said, "but I understand then that I'm free."

"Free as air, dear Jane."

"Good." Then just as she was off, "Ah dear old Edward!" the guest exclaimed. Her kinsman, as she was fond of calling him, had reached the top of the staircase, and Mrs. Brookenham, by the fire, heard them meet on the landing — heard also the Duchess protest against his turning to see her down. Mrs. Brookenham, listening to them, hoped Edward would accept the protest and think it sufficient to leave her with the footman. Their common consciousness that she was a kind of cousin, a consciousness not devoid of satisfaction, was quite consistent with a view, early arrived at, of the absurdity of any fuss about her.

III

When Mr. Brookenham appeared his wife was prompt. “She’s coming back for Lord Petherton.”

“Oh!” he simply said.

“There’s something between them.”

“Oh!” he merely repeated. And it would have taken many such sounds on his part to represent a spirit of response discernible to any one but his mate.

“There have been things before,” she went on, “but I haven’t felt sure. Don’t you know how one has sometimes a flash?”

It couldn’t be said of Edward Brookenham, who seemed to bend for sitting down more hinges than most men, that he looked as if he knew either this or anything else. He had a pale cold face, marked and made regular, made even in a manner handsome, by a hardness of line in which, oddly, there was no significance, no accent. Clean-shaven, slightly bald, with unlighted grey eyes and a mouth that gave the impression of not working easily, he suggested a stippled drawing by an inferior master. Lean moreover and stiff, and with the air of having here and there in his person a bone or two more than his share, he had once or twice, at fancy-balls, been thought striking in a dress copied from one of Holbein’s English portraits. But when once some such meaning as that had been put into him it took a long time to put another, a longer time than even his extreme exposure or anybody’s study of the problem had yet made possible. If anything particular had finally been expected from him it might have been a summary or an explanation of the things he had always not said; but there was something in him that had long since pacified all impatience, drugged all curiosity. He had never in his life answered such a question as his wife had just put him and which she would not have put had she feared a reply. So dry and decent and even distinguished did he look, as if he had positively been created to meet a propriety and match some other piece, that lady, with her famous perceptions, would no more have appealed to him seriously on a general proposition than she would, for such a response, have rung the drawing-room bell. He was none the less held to have a great promiscuous wisdom. “What is it that’s between them?” he demanded.

“What’s between any woman and the man she’s making up to?”

“Why there may often be nothing. I didn’t know she even particularly knew him,” Brookenham added.

“It’s exactly what she would like to prevent any one’s knowing, and her coming here to be with him when she knows I know SHE knows — don’t you see? — that he’s to be here, is just one of those calculations that ARE subtle enough to put off the scent a woman who has but half a nose.” Mrs. Brookenham as she spoke appeared to attest by the pretty star-gazing way she thrust it into the air her own possession of the totality of such a feature. “I don’t know yet quite what I think, but one wakes up to such things soon enough.”

“Do you suppose it’s her idea that he’ll marry her?” Brookenham asked in his colourless way.

“My dear Edward!” his wife murmured for all answer.

“But if she can see him in other places why should she want to see him here?” Edward persisted in a voice destitute of expression.

Mrs. Brookenham now had plenty of that. “Do you mean if she can see him in his own house?”

“No cream, please,” her husband said. “Hasn’t she a house too?”

“Yes, but so pervaded all over by Aggie and Miss Merriman.”

“Oh!” Brookenham commented.

“There has always been some man — I’ve always known there has. And now it’s Petherton,” said his companion.

“But where’s the attraction?”

“In HIM? Why lots of women could tell you. Petherton has had a career.”

“But I mean in old Jane.”

“Well, I dare say lots of men could tell you. She’s no older than any one else. She has also such great elements.”

“Oh I dare say she’s all right,” Brookenham returned as if his interest in the case had dropped. You might have felt you got a little nearer to him on guessing that in so peopled a circle satiety was never far from him.

“I mean for instance she has such a grand idea of duty. She thinks we’re nowhere!”

“Nowhere?”

"With our children — with our home life. She's awfully down on Tishy."

"Tishy?" — Edward appeared for a moment at a loss.

"Tishy Grendon — and her craze for Nanda."

"Has she a craze for Nanda?"

"Surely I told you Nanda's to be with her for Easter."

"I believe you did," he bethought himself, "but you didn't say anything about a craze. And where's Harold?" he went on.

"He's at Brander. That is he will be by dinner. He has just gone."

"And how does he get there?"

"Why by the South-Western. They'll send to meet him."

Brookenham appeared for a moment to view this statement in the dry light of experience. "They'll only send if there are others too."

"Of course then there'll be others — lots. The more the better for Harold."

This young man's father was silent a little. "Perhaps — if they don't play high."

"Ah," said his mother, "however Harold plays he has a way of winning."

"He has a way too of being a hopeless ass. What I meant was how he comes there at all," Edward explained.

"Why as any one comes — by being invited. She wrote to him — weeks ago."

Brookenham just traceably took this in, but to what profit was not calculable. "To Harold? Very good-natured." He had another short reflexion, after which he continued: "If they don't send he'll be in for five miles in a fly — and the man will see that he gets his money."

"They WILL send — after her note."

"Did it say so?"

Her melancholy eyes seemed, from afar, to run over the page. "I don't remember — but it was so cordial."

Again he meditated. "That often doesn't prevent one's being let in for ten shillings."

There was more gloom in this forecast than his wife had desired to produce. "Well, my dear Edward, what do you want me to do? Whatever a young man does, it seems to me, he's let in for ten shillings."

"Ah but he needn't be — that's my point. *I* wasn't at his age."

Harold's mother took up her book again. "Perhaps you weren't the same success! I mean at such places."

"Well, I didn't borrow money to make me one — as I've a sharp idea our young scamp does."

Mrs. Brookenham hesitated. "From whom do you mean — the Jews?"

He looked at her as if her vagueness might be assumed. "No. They, I take it, are not quite so cordial to him, since you call it so, as the old ladies. He gets it from Mitchy."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Brookenham. "Are you very sure?" she then demanded.

He had got up and put his empty cup back on the tea-table, wandering afterwards a little about the room and looking out, as his wife had done half an hour before, at the dreary rain and the now duskier ugliness. He reverted in this attitude, with a complete unconsciousness of making for irritation, to an issue they might be supposed to have dropped. "He'll have a lovely drive for his money!" His companion, however, said nothing and he presently came round again. "No, I'm not absolutely sure — of his having had it from Mitchy. If I were I should do something."

"What would you do?" She put it as if she couldn't possibly imagine.

"I'd speak to him."

"To Harold?"

"No — that might just put it into his head." Brookenham walked up and down a little with his hands in his pockets, after which, with a complete concealment of the steps of the transition, "Where are we dining to-night?" he brought out.

"Nowhere, thank heaven. We grace our own board."

"Oh — with those fellows, as you said, and Jane?"

"That's not for dinner. The Baggers and Mary Pinthorpe and — upon my word I forget."

"You'll see when she comes," suggested Brookenham, who was again at the window.

"It isn't a she — it's two or three he's, I think," his wife replied with her indifferent anxiety. "But I don't know what dinner it is," she bethought herself; "it may be the one that's after Easter. Then that one's this one," she added with her eyes once more on her book.

"Well, it's a relief to dine at home" — and Brookenham faced about. "Would you mind finding out?" he asked with some abruptness.

"Do you mean who's to dine?"

"No, that doesn't matter. But whether Mitchy HAS come down."

"I can only find out by asking him."

"Oh *I* could ask him." He seemed disappointed at his wife's want of resource.

"And you don't want to?"

He looked coldly, from before the fire, over the prettiness of her brown bent head. "It will be such a beastly bore if he admits it."

"And you think poor I can make him not admit it?" She put the question as if it were really her own thought too, but they were a couple who could, even face to face and unlike the augurs behind the altar, think these things without laughing. "If he SHOULD admit it," Mrs. Brookenham threw in, "will you give me the money?"

"The money?"

"To pay Mitchy back."

She had now raised her eyes to her husband, but, turning away, he failed to meet them. "He'll deny it."

"Well, if they all deny it," she presently remarked, "it's a simple enough matter. I'm sure *I* don't want them to come down on us! But that's the advantage," she almost prattled on, "of having so many such charming friends. They DON'T come down."

This again was a remark of a sweep that there appeared to be nothing in Brookenham's mind to match; so that, scarcely pausing in the walk he had resumed, he only said: "Who do you mean by 'all'?"

"Why if he has had anything from Mitchy I dare say he has had something from Van."

"Oh!" Brookenham returned as if with a still deeper drop of interest.

"They oughtn't to do it," she declared; "they ought to tell us, and when they don't it serves them right." Even this observation, however, failed to rouse in her husband a response, and, as she had quite formed the habit of doing, she philosophically answered herself. "But I don't suppose they do it on spec."

It was less apparent than ever what Edward supposed. "Oh Van hasn't money to chuck about."

"Ah I only mean a sovereign here and there."

"Well," Brookenham threw out after another turn, "I think Van, you know, is your affair."

"It ALL seems to be my affair!" she lamented too woefully to have other than a comic effect. "And of course then it will be still more so if he should begin to apply to Mr. Longdon."

"We must stop that in time."

"Do you mean by warning Mr. Longdon and requesting him immediately to tell us? That won't be very pleasant," Mrs. Brookenham noted.

"Well then wait and see."

She waited only a minute — it might have appeared she already saw. "I want him to be kind to Harold and can't help thinking he will."

"Yes, but I fancy that that will be his notion of it — keeping him from making debts. I dare say one needn't trouble about him," Brookenham added. "He can take care of himself."

"He appears to have done so pretty well all these years," she mused. "As I saw him in my childhood I see him now, and I see now that I saw then even how awfully in love he was with mamma. He's too lovely about mamma," Mrs. Brookenham pursued.

"Oh!" her husband replied.

The vivid past held her a moment. "I see now I must have known a lot as a child."

"Oh!" her companion repeated.

"I want him to take an interest in us. Above all in the children. He ought to like us" — she followed it up. "It will be a sort of 'poetic justice.' He sees the reasons for himself and we mustn't prevent it." She turned the possibilities over, but they produced a reserve. "The thing is I don't see how he CAN like Harold."

"Then he won't lend him money," said Brookenham with all his grimness.

This contingency too she considered. "You make me feel as if I wished he would — which is too dreadful. And I don't think he really likes ME!" she went on.

"Oh!" her husband again ejaculated. "I mean not utterly REALLY. He has to try to. But it won't make any difference," she next remarked. "Do you mean his trying?"

"No, I mean his not succeeding. He'll be just the same." She saw it steadily and saw it whole. "On account of mamma."

Brookenham also, with his perfect propriety, put it before himself. "And will he — on account of your mother — also like ME?"

She weighed it. "No, Edward." She covered him with her loveliest expression. "No, not really either. But it won't make any difference." This time she had pulled him up.

"Not if he doesn't like Harold or like you or like me?" Edward clearly found himself able to accept only the premise.

"He'll be perfectly loyal. It will be the advantage of mamma!" Mrs. Brookenham cried. "Mamma, Edward," she brought out with a flash of solemnity— "mamma WAS wonderful. There have been times when I've always felt her still with us, but Mr. Longdon makes it somehow so real. Whether she's with me or not, at any rate, she's with HIM; so that when HE'S with me, don't you see — ?"

"It comes to the same thing?" her husband intelligently asked. "I see. And when was he with you last?"

"Not since the day he dined — but that was only last week. He'll come soon — I know from Van."

"And what does Van know?"

"Oh all sorts of things. He has taken the greatest fancy to him."

"The old boy — to Van?"

"Van to Mr. Longdon. And the other way too. Mr. Longdon has been most kind to him."

Brookenham still moved about. "Well, if he likes Van and doesn't like US, what good will that do us?"

"You'd understand soon enough if you felt Van's loyalty."

"Oh the things you expect me to feel, my dear!" Edward Brookenham lightly moaned.

"Well, it doesn't matter. But he IS as loyal to me as Mr. Longdon to mamma."

The statement produced on his part an unusual vision of the comedy of things. "Every Jenny has her Jockey!" Yet perhaps — remarkably enough — there was even more imagination in his next words. "And what sort of means?"

"Mr. Longdon? Oh very good. Mamma wouldn't have been the loser. Not that she cared. He MUST like Nanda," Mrs. Brookenham wound up.

Her companion appeared to look at the idea and then meet it. "He'll have to see her first."

"Oh he shall see her!" she rang out. "It's time for her at any rate to sit downstairs."

"It was time, you know, *I* thought, a year ago."

"Yes, I know what you thought. But it wasn't."

She had spoken with decision, but he seemed unwilling to concede the point. "You allowed yourself she was all ready."

"SHE was all ready — yes. But I wasn't. I am now," Mrs. Brookenham, with a fine emphasis on her adverb, proclaimed as she turned to meet the opening of the door and the appearance of the butler, whose announcement— "Lord Petherton and Mr. Mitchett" — might for an observer have seemed immediately to offer support to her changed state.

IV

Lord Petherton, a man of five-and-thirty, whose robust but symmetrical proportions gave to his dark blue double-breasted coat an air of tightness that just failed of compromising his tailor, had for his main facial sign a certain pleasant brutality, the effect partly of a bold handsome parade of carnivorous teeth, partly of an expression of nose suggesting that this feature had paid a little, in the heat of youth, for some aggression at the time admired and even publicly commemorated. He would have been ugly, he substantively granted, had he not been happy; he would have been dangerous had he not been warranted. Many things doubtless performed for him this last service, but none so much as the delightful sound of his voice, the voice, as it were, of another man, a nature reclaimed, supercivilised, adjusted to the perpetual "chaff" which kept him smiling in a way that would have been a mistake and indeed an impossibility if he had really been witty. His bright familiarity was that of a young prince whose confidence had never had to falter, and the only thing that at all qualified the resemblance was the equal familiarity excited in his subjects.

Mr. Mitchett had so little intrinsic appearance that an observer would have felt indebted for help in placing him to the rare prominence of his colourless eyes and the positive attention drawn to his chin by the precipitation of its retreat from discovery. Dressed on the other hand not as gentlemen dress in London to pay their respects to the fair, he excited by the exhibition of garments that had nothing in common save the violence and the independence of their pattern a belief that in the desperation of humility he wished to render public his having thrown to the winds the effort to please. It was written all over him that he had judged once for all his personal case and that, as his character, superficially disposed to gaiety, deprived him of the resource of shyness and shade, the effect of comedy might not escape him if secured by a real plunge. There was comedy therefore in the form of his pot-hat and the colour of his spotted shirt, in the systematic disagreement, above all, of his coat, waistcoat and trousers. It was only on long acquaintance that his so many ingenious ways of showing he appreciated his commonness could present him as secretly rare.

"And where's the child this time?" he asked of his hostess as soon as he was seated near her.

"Why do you say 'this time' as if it were different from any other time?" she replied as she gave him his tea.

"Only because, as the months and the years elapse, it's more and more of a wonder, whenever I don't see her, to think what she does with herself — or what you do with her. What it does show, I suppose," Mr. Mitchett went on, "is that she takes no trouble to meet me."

"My dear Mitchy," said Mrs. Brookenham, "what do YOU know about 'trouble' — either poor Nanda's or mine or anybody's else? You've never had to take any in your life, you're the spoiled child of fortune and you skim over the surface of things in a way that seems often to represent you as supposing everybody else has wings. Most other people are sticking fast in their native mud."

"Mud, Mrs. Brook — mud, mud!" he protestingly cried as, while he watched his fellow visitor move to a distance with their host, he glanced about the room, taking in afresh the Louis Seize secretary which looked better closed than open and for which he always had a knowing eye. "Remarkably charming — mud!"

"Well, that's what a great deal of the element really appears to-day to be thought; and precisely as a specimen, Mitchy dear, those two French books you were so good as to send me and which — really this time, you extraordinary man!" She fell back, intimately reproachful, from the effect produced on her, renouncing all expression save that of the rolled eye.

"Why, were they particularly dreadful?" — Mitchy was honestly surprised. "I rather liked the one in the pink cover — what's the confounded thing called? — I thought it had a sort of a something-or-other." He had cast his eye about as if for a glimpse of the forgotten title, and she caught the question as he vaguely and good-humouredly dropped it.

"A kind of a morbid modernity? There IS that," she dimly conceded.

"Is that what they call it? Awfully good name. You must have got it from old Van!" he gaily declared.

"I dare say I did. I get the good things from him and the bad ones from you. But you're not to suppose," Mrs. Brookenham went on, "that I've discussed your horrible book with him."

"Come, I say!" Mr. Mitchett protested; "I've seen you with books from Vanderbank which if you HAVE discussed them with him — well," he laughed, "I should like to have been there!"

"You haven't seen me with anything like yours — no, no, never, never!" She was particularly positive.

“Van on the contrary gives tremendous warnings, makes apologies, in advance, for things that — well, after all, haven’t killed one.”

“That have even perhaps a little, after the warnings, let one down?”

She took no notice of this coarse pleasantry, she simply adhered to her thesis. “One has taken one’s dose and one isn’t such a fool as to be deaf to some fresh true note if it happens to turn up. But for abject horrid unredeemed vileness from beginning to end—”

“So you read to the end?” Mr. Mitchett interposed.

“I read to see what you could possibly have sent such things to me for, and because so long as they were in my hands they were not in the hands of others. Please to remember in future that the children are all over the place and that Harold and Nanda have their nose in everything.”

“I promise to remember,” Mr. Mitchett returned, “as soon as you make old Van do the same.”

“I do make old Van — I pull old Van up much oftener than I succeed in pulling you. I must say,” Mrs. Brookenham went on, “you’re all getting to require among you in general an amount of what one may call editing!” She gave one of her droll universal sighs. “I’ve got your books at any rate locked up and I wish you’d send for them quickly again; one’s too nervous about anything happening and their being perhaps found among one’s relics. Charming literary remains!” she laughed.

The friendly Mitchy was also much amused. “By Jove, the most awful things ARE found! Have you heard about old Randage and what his executors have just come across? The most abominable—”

“I haven’t heard,” she broke in, “and I don’t want to; but you give me a shudder and I beg you’ll have your offerings removed, since I can’t think of confiding them for the purpose to any one in this house. I might burn them up in the dead of night, but even then I should be fearfully nervous.”

“I’ll send then my usual messenger,” said Mitchy, “a person I keep for such jobs, thoroughly seasoned, as you may imagine, and of a discretion — what do you call it? — a toute epreuve. Only you must let me say that I like your terror about Harold! Do you think he spends his time over Dr. Watts’s hymns?”

Mrs. Brookenham just hesitated, and nothing, in general, was so becoming to her as the act of hesitation. “Dear Mitchy, do you know I want awfully to talk to you about Harold?”

“About his French reading, Mrs. Brook?” Mitchy responded with interest. “The worse things are, let me just mention to you about that, the better they seem positively to be for one’s feeling up in the language. They’re more difficult, the bad ones — and there’s a lot in that. All the young men know it — those who are going up for exams.”

She had her eyes for a little on Lord Petherton and her husband; then as if she had not heard what her interlocutor had just said she overcame her last scruple. “Dear Mitchy, has he had money from you?”

He stared with his good goggle eyes — he laughed out. “Why on earth — ? But do you suppose I’d tell you if he had?”

“He hasn’t really borrowed the most dreadful sums?”

Mitchy was highly diverted. “Why should he? For what, please?”

“That’s just it — for what? What does he do with it all? What in the world becomes of it?”

“Well,” Mitchy suggested, “he’s saving up to start a business. Harold’s irreproachable — hasn’t a vice. Who knows in these days what may happen? He sees further than any young man I know. Do let him save.”

She looked far away with her sweet world-weariness. “If you weren’t an angel it would be a horror to be talking to you. But I insist on knowing.” She insisted now with her absurdly pathetic eyes on him. “What kind of sums?”

“You shall never, never find out — not if you were never to speak to me again,” Mr. Mitchett replied with extravagant firmness. “Harold’s one of my great amusements — I really have awfully few; and if you deprive me of him you’ll be a fiend. There are only one or two things I want to live for, but one of them is to see how far Harold will go. Please give me some more tea.”

“Do you positively swear?” she asked with intensity as she helped him. Then without waiting for his answer: “You have the common charity to US, I suppose, to see the position you’d put us in. Fancy Edward!” she quite austerely threw off.

Mr. Mitchett, at this, had on his side a wonder. “Does Edward imagine — ?”

“My dear man, Edward never ‘imagined’ anything in life.” She still had her eyes on him. “Therefore if he SEES a thing, don’t you know? it must exist.”

Mitchy for a little fixed the person mentioned as he sat with his other guest, but whatever this person saw

he failed just then to see his wife's companion, whose eyes he never met. His face only offered itself after the fashion of a clean domestic vessel, a receptacle with the peculiar property of constantly serving yet never filling, to Lord Petherton's talkative splash. "Well, only don't let him take it up. Let it be only between you and me," Mr. Mitchett pleaded; "keep him quiet — don't let him speak to me." He appeared to convey with his pleasant extravagance that Edward looked dangerous, and he went on with a rigour of levity: "It must be OUR little quarrel."

There were different ways of meeting such a tone, but Mrs. Brookenham's choice was remarkably prompt. "I don't think I quite understand what dreadful joke you may be making, but I dare say if you HAD let Harold borrow you'd have another manner, and I was at any rate determined to have the question out with you."

"Let us always have everything out — that's quite my own idea. It's you," said Mr. Mitchett, "who are by no means always so frank with me as I recognise — oh, I do THAT! — what it must have cost you to be over this little question of Harold. There's one thing, Mrs. Brook, you do dodge."

"What do I ever dodge, dear Mitchy?" Mrs. Brook quite tenderly asked.

"Why, when I ask you about your other child you're off like a frightened fawn. When have you ever, on my doing so, said 'my darling Mitchy, I'll ring for her to be asked to come down so that you can see her for yourself' — when have you ever said anything like that?"

"I see," Mrs. Brookenham mused; "you think I sacrifice her. You're very interesting among you all, and I've certainly a delightful circle. The Duchess has just been letting me have it most remarkably hot, and as she's presently coming back you'll be able to join forces with her."

Mitchy looked a little at a loss. "On the subject of your sacrifice—"

"Of my innocent and helpless, yet somehow at the same time, as a consequence of my cynicism, dreadfully damaged and depraved daughter." She took in for an instant the slight bewilderment against which, as a result of her speech, even so expert an intelligence as Mr. Mitchett's had not been proof; then with a small jerk of her head at the other side of the room made the quickest of transitions. "What IS there between her and him?"

Mitchy wondered at the other two. "Between Edward and the girl?"

"Don't talk nonsense. Between Petherton and Jane."

Mitchy could only stare, and the wide noonday light of his regard was at such moments really the redemption of his ugliness. "What 'is' there? Is there anything?"

"It's too beautiful," Mrs. Brookenham appreciatively sighed, "your relation with him! You won't compromise him."

"It would be nicer of me," Mitchy laughed, "not to want to compromise HER!"

"Oh Jane!" Mrs. Brookenham dropped. "DOES he like her?" she continued. "You must know."

"Ah it's just my knowing that constitutes the beauty of my loyalty — of my delicacy." He had his quick jumps too. "Am I never, never to see the child?"

This enquiry appeared only to confirm his friend in the view of what was touching in him. "You're the most delicate thing I know, and it crops up with effect the oddest in the intervals of your corruption. Your talk's half the time impossible; you respect neither age nor sex nor condition; one doesn't know what you'll say or do next; and one has to return your books — c'est tout dire — under cover of darkness. Yet there's in the midst of all this and in the general abyss of you a little deepdown delicious niceness, a sweet sensibility, that one has actually one's self, shocked as one perpetually is at you, quite to hold one's breath and stay one's hand for fear of ruffling or bruising. There's no one in talk with whom," she balmily continued, "I find myself half so often suddenly moved to pull up short. You've more little toes to tread on — though you pretend you haven't: I mean morally speaking, don't you know? — than even I have myself, and I've so many that I could wish most of them cut off. You never spare me a shock — no, you don't do that: it isn't the form your delicacy takes. But you'll know what I mean, all the same, I think, when I tell you that there are lots I spare YOU!"

Mr. Mitchett fairly glowed with the candour of his attention. "Know what you mean, dearest lady? How can a man handicapped to death, a man of my origin, my appearance, my general weaknesses, drawbacks, immense indebtedness, all round, for the start, as it were, that I feel my friends have been so good as to allow me: how can such a man not be conscious every moment that every one about him goes on tiptoe and winks at every one else? What CAN you all mention in my presence, poor things, that isn't personal?"

Mrs. Brookenham's face covered him for an instant as no painted Madonna's had ever covered the little

charge at the breast beneath it. “And the finest thing of all in you is your beautiful, beautiful pride! You’re prouder than all of us put together.” She checked a motion that he had apparently meant as a protest — she went on with her muffled wisdom. “There isn’t a man but YOU whom Petherton wouldn’t have made vulgar. He isn’t vulgar himself — at least not exceptionally; but he’s just one of those people, a class one knows well, who are so fearfully, in this country, the cause of it in others. For all I know he’s the cause of it in me — the cause of it even in poor Edward. For I’m vulgar, Mitchy dear — very often; and the marvel of you is that you never are.”

“Thank you for everything. Thank you above all for ‘marvel’!” Mitchy grinned.

“Oh I know what I say!” — she didn’t in the least blush. “I’ll tell you something,” she pursued with the same gravity, “if you’ll promise to tell no one on earth. If you’re proud I’m not. There! It’s most extraordinary and I try to conceal it even to myself; but there’s no doubt whatever about it — I’m not proud pour deux sous. And some day, on some awful occasion, I shall show it. So — I notify you. Shall you love me still?”

“To the bitter end,” Mitchy loyally responded. “For how CAN, how need, a woman be ‘proud’ who’s so preternaturally clever? Pride’s only for use when wit breaks down — it’s the train the cyclist takes when his tire’s deflated. When that happens to YOUR tire, Mrs. Brook, you’ll let me know. And you do make me wonder just now,” he confessed, “why you’re taking such particular precautions and throwing out such a cloud of skirmishers. If you want to shoot me dead a single bullet will do.” He faltered but an instant before completing his sense. “Where you really want to come out is at the fact that Nanda loathes me and that I might as well give up asking for her.”

“Are you quite serious?” his companion after a moment resumed. “Do you really and truly like her, Mitchy?”

“I like her as much as I dare to — as much as a man can like a girl when from the very first of his seeing her and judging her he has also seen, and seen with all the reasons, that there’s no chance for him whatever. Of course, with all that, he has done his best not to let himself go. But there are moments,” Mr. Mitchett ruefully added, “when it would relieve him awfully to feel free for a good spin.”

“I think you exaggerate,” his hostess replied, “the difficulties in your way. What do you mean by all the ‘reasons’?”

“Why one of them I’ve already mentioned. I make her flesh creep.”

“My own Mitchy!” Mrs. Brookenham protestingly moaned.

“The other is that — very naturally — she’s in love.”

“With whom under the sun?”

Mrs. Brookenham had, with her startled stare, met his eyes long enough to have taken something from him before he next spoke.

“You really have never suspected? With whom conceivably but old Van?”

“Nanda’s in love with old Van?” — the degree to which she had never suspected was scarce to be expressed. “Why he’s twice her age — he has seen her in a pinafore with a dirty face and well slapped for it: he has never thought of her in the world.”

“How can a person of your acuteness, my dear woman,” Mitchy asked, “mention such trifles as having the least to do with the case? How can you possibly have such a fellow about, so beastly good-looking, so infernally well turned out in the way of ‘culture,’ and so bringing them down in short on every side, and expect in the bosom of your family the absence of history of the reigns of the good kings? If YOU were a girl wouldn’t YOU turn purple? If I were a girl shouldn’t I — unless, as is more likely, I turned green?”

Mrs. Brookenham was deeply affected. “Nanda does turn purple — ?”

“The loveliest shade you ever saw. It’s too absurd that you haven’t noticed.”

It was characteristic of Mrs. Brookenham’s amiability that, with her sudden sense of the importance of this new light, she should be quite ready to abase herself. “There are so many things in one’s life. One follows false scents. One doesn’t make out everything at once. If you’re right you must help me. We must see more of her.”

“But what good will that do me?” Mitchy appealed.

“Don’t you care enough for her to want to help HER?” Then before he could speak, “Poor little darling dear!” his hostess tenderly ejaculated. “What does she think or dream? Truly she’s laying up treasure!”

“Oh he likes her,” said Mitchy. “He likes her in fact extremely.”

"Do you mean he has told you so?"

"Oh no — we never mention it! But he likes her," Mr. Mitchett stubbornly repeated. "And he's thoroughly straight."

Mrs. Brookenham for a moment turned these things over; after which she came out in a manner that visibly surprised him. "It isn't as if you wished to be nasty about him, is it? — because I know you like him yourself. You're so wonderful to your friends" — oh she could let him see that she knew!— "and in such different and exquisite ways. There are those like HIM" — she signified her other visitor— "who get everything out of you and whom you really appear fond of, or at least to put up with, just FOR that. Then there are those who ask nothing — and whom you're fond of in spite of it."

Mitchy leaned back from this, fist within fist, watching her with a certain disguised emotion. He grinned almost too much for mere amusement. "That's the class to which YOU belong."

"It's the best one," she returned, "and I'm careful to remain in it. You try to get us, by bribery, into the inferior place, because, proud as you are, it bores you a little that you like us so much. But we won't go — at least I won't. You may make Van," she wonderfully continued. "There's nothing you wouldn't do for him or give him." Mitchy admired her from his position, slowly shaking his head with it. "He's the man — with no fortune and just as he is, to the smallest particular — whom you would have liked to be, whom you intensely envy, and yet to whom you're magnanimous enough for almost any sacrifice."

Mitchy's appreciation had fairly deepened to a flush. "Magnificent, magnificent Mrs. Brook! What ARE you in thunder up to?"

"Therefore, as I say," she imperturbably went on, "it's not to do him an ill turn that you make a point of what you've just told me."

Mr. Mitchett for a minute gave no sign but his high colour and his queer glare. "How could it do him an ill turn?"

"Oh it WOULD be a way, don't you see? to put before me the need of getting rid of him. For he may 'like' Nanda as much as you please: he'll never, never," Mrs. Brookenham resolutely quavered— "he'll never come to the scratch. And to feel that as *I* do," she explained, "can only be, don't you also see? to want to save her."

It would have appeared at last that poor Mitchy did see. "By taking it in time? By forbidding him the house?"

She seemed to stand with little nipping scissors in a garden of alternatives. "Or by shipping HER off. Will you help me to save her?" she broke out again after a moment. "It isn't true," she continued, "that she has any aversion to you."

"Have you charged her with it?" Mitchy demanded with a courage that amounted to high gallantry.

It inspired on the spot his interlocutress, and her own pluck, of as fine a quality now as her diplomacy, which was saying much, fell but little below. "Yes, my dear friend — frankly."

"Good. Then I know what she said."

"She absolutely denied it."

"Oh yes — they always do, because they pity me," Mitchy smiled. "She said what they always say — that the effect I produce is, though at first upsetting, one that little by little they find it possible to get used to. The world's full of people who are getting used to me," Mr. Mitchett concluded.

"It's what *I* shall never do, for you're quite too great a luxury!" Mrs. Brookenham declared. "If I haven't threshed you out really MORE with Nanda," she continued, "it has been from a scruple of a sort you people never do a woman the justice to impute. You're the object of views that have so much more to set them off."

Mr. Mitchett on this jumped up; he was clearly conscious of his nerves; he fidgeted away a few steps and then, his hands in his pockets, fixed on his hostess a countenance more controlled. "What does the Duchess mean by your daughter's being — as I understood you to quote her just now— 'damaged and depraved'?"

Mrs. Brookenham came up — she literally rose — smiling. "You fit the cap. You know how she'd like you for little Aggie!"

"What does she mean, what does she mean?" Mitchy repeated.

The door, as he spoke, was thrown open; Mrs. Brookenham glanced round. "You've the chance to find out from herself!" The Duchess had come back and little Aggie was in her wake.

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That young lady, in this relation, was certainly a figure to have offered a foundation for the highest hopes. As slight and white, as delicately lovely, as a gathered garden lily, her admirable training appeared to hold her out to them all as with precautionary finger-tips. She presumed, however, so little on any introduction that, shyly and submissively, waiting for the word of direction, she stopped short in the centre of the general friendliness till Mrs. Brookenham fairly became, to meet her, also a shy little girl — put out a timid hand with wonder-struck innocent eyes that hesitated whether a kiss of greeting might be dared. "Why you dear good strange 'ickle' thing, you haven't been here for ages, but it IS a joy to see you and I do hope you've brought your doll!" — such might have been the sense of our friend's fond murmur while, looking at her up and down with pure pleasure, she drew the rare creature to a sofa. Little Aggie presented, up and down, an arrangement of dress exactly in the key of her age, her complexion, her emphasised virginity. She might have been prepared for her visit by a cluster of doting nuns, cloistered daughters of ancient houses and educators of similar products, whose taste, hereditarily good, had grown, out of the world and most delightfully, so queer as to leave on everything they touched a particular shade of distinction. The Duchess had brought in with the child an air of added confidence for which an observer would in a moment have seen the grounds, the association of the pair being so markedly favourable to each. Its younger member carried out the style of her aunt's presence quite as one of the accessory figures effectively thrown into old portraits. The Duchess on the other hand seemed, with becoming blandness, to draw from her niece the dignity of a kind of office of state — hereditary governess of the children of the blood. Little Aggie had a smile as softly bright as a Southern dawn, and the friends of her relative looked at each other, according to a fashion frequent in Mrs. Brookenham's drawing-room, in free exchange of their happy impression. Mr. Mitchett was none the less scantly diverted from his estimate of the occasion Mrs. Brookenham had just named to him.

"My dear Duchess," he promptly asked, "do you mind explaining to me an opinion I've just heard of your — with marked originality — holding?"

The Duchess, her head all in the air, considered an instant her little ivory princess. "I'm always ready, Mr. Mitchett, to defend my opinions; but if it's a question of going much into the things that are the subjects of some of them perhaps we had better, if you don't mind, choose our time and our place."

"No 'time,' gracious lady, for my impatience," Mr. Mitchett replied, "could be better than the present — but if you've reasons for wanting a better place why shouldn't we go on the spot into another room?"

Lord Petherton, at this enquiry, broke into instant mirth. "Well, of all the coolness, Mitchy! — he does go at it, doesn't he, Mrs. Brook? What do you want to do in another room?" he demanded of his friend. "Upon my word, Duchess, under the nose of those—"

The Duchess, on the first blush, lent herself to the humour of the case. "Well, Petherton, of 'those'? — I defy him to finish his sentence!" she smiled to the others.

"Of those," said his lordship, "who flatter themselves that when you do happen to find them somewhere your first idea is not quite to jump at a pretext for getting off somewhere else. Especially," he continued to jest, "with a man of Mitchy's vile reputation."

"Oh!" Edward Brookenham exclaimed at this, but only as with quiet relief.

"Mitchy's offer is perfectly safe, I may let him know," his wife remarked, "for I happen to be sure that nothing would really induce Jane to leave Aggie five minutes among us here without remaining herself to see that we don't become improper."

"Well then if we're already pretty far on the way to it," Lord Petherton resumed, "what on earth MIGHT we arrive at in the absence of your control? I warn you, Duchess," he joyously pursued, "that if you go out of the room with Mitchy I shall rapidly become quite awful."

The Duchess during this brief passage never took her eyes from her niece, who rewarded her attention with the sweetness of consenting dependence. The child's foreign origin was so delicately but unmistakeably written in all her exquisite lines that her look might have expressed the modest detachment of a person to whom the language of her companions was unknown. Her protectress then glanced round the circle. "You're very odd people all of you, and I don't think you quite know how ridiculous you are. Aggie and I are simple stranger-folk; there's a great deal we don't understand, yet we're none the less not easily frightened. In what is it, Mr. Mitchett," the Duchess asked, "that I've wounded your susceptibilities?"

Mr. Mitchett cast about; he had apparently found time to reflect on his precipitation. “I see what Petherton’s up to, and I won’t, by drawing you aside just now, expose your niece to anything that might immediately oblige Mrs. Brook to catch her up and flee with her. But the first time I find you more isolated — well,” he laughed, though not with the clearest ring, “all I can say is Mind your eyes dear Duchess!”

“It’s about your thinking, Jane,” Mrs. Brookenham placidly explained, “that Nanda suffers — in her morals, don’t you know? — by my neglect. I wouldn’t say anything about you that I can’t bravely say TO you; therefore since he has plumped out with it I do confess that I’ve appealed to him on what, as so good an old friend, HE thinks of your contention.”

“What in the world IS Jane’s contention?” Edward Brookenham put the question as if they were “stuck” at cards.

“You really all of you,” the Duchess replied with excellent coolness, “choose extraordinary conditions for the discussion of delicate matters. There are decidedly too many things on which we don’t feel alike. You’re all inconceivable just now. Je ne peux pourtant pas la mettre a la porte, cette cherie” — whom she covered again with the gay solicitude that seemed to have in it a vibration of private entreaty: “Don’t understand, my own darling — don’t understand!”

Little Aggie looked about with an impartial politeness that, as an expression of the general blind sense of her being as to every particular in hands at full liberty either to spot or to spare her, was touching enough to bring tears to all eyes. It perhaps had to do with the sudden emotion with which — using now quite a different manner — Mrs. Brookenham again embraced her, and even with this lady’s equally abrupt and altogether wonderful address to her: “Between you and me straight, my dear, and as from friend to friend, I know you’ll never doubt that everything must be all right! — What I spoke of to poor Mitchy,” she went on to the Duchess, “is the dreadful view you take of my letting Nanda go to Tishy — and indeed of the general question of any acquaintance between young unmarried and young married females. Mr. Mitchett’s sufficiently interested in us, Jane, to make it natural of me to take him into our confidence in one of our difficulties. On the other hand we feel your solicitude, and I needn’t tell you at this time of day what weight in every respect we attach to your judgement. Therefore it WILL be a difficulty for us, cara mia, don’t you see? if we decide suddenly, under the spell of your influence, that our daughter must break off a friendship — it WILL be a difficulty for us to put the thing to Nanda herself in such a way as that she shall have some sort of notion of what suddenly possesses us. Then there’ll be the much stiffer job of putting it to poor Tishy. Yet if her house IS an impossible place what else is one to do? Carrie Donner’s to be there, and Carrie Donner’s a nature apart; but how can we ask even a little lamb like Tishy to give up her own sister?”

The question had been launched with an argumentative sharpness that made it for a moment keep possession of the air, and during this moment, before a single member of the circle could rally, Mrs. Brookenham’s effect was superseded by that of the reappearance of the butler. “I say, my dear, don’t shriek!” — Edward Brookenham had only time to sound this warning before a lady, presenting herself in the open doorway, followed close on the announcement of her name. “Mrs. Beach Donner!” — the impression was naturally marked. Every one betrayed it a little but Mrs. Brookenham, who, more than the others, appeared to have the help of seeing that by a merciful stroke her visitor had just failed to hear. This visitor, a young woman of striking, of startling appearance, who, in the manner of certain shiny house-doors and railings, instantly created a presumption of the lurking label “Fresh paint,” found herself, with an embarrassment oddly opposed to the positive pitch of her complexion, in the presence of a group in which it was yet immediately evident that every one was a friend. Every one, to show no one had been caught, said something extremely easy; so that it was after a moment only poor Mrs. Donner who, seated close to her hostess, seemed to be in any degree in the wrong. This moreover was essentially her fault, so extreme was the anomaly of her having, without the means to back it up, committed herself to a “scheme of colour” that was practically an advertisement of courage. Irregularly pretty and painfully shy, she was retouched from brow to chin like a suburban photograph — the moral of which was simply that she should either have left more to nature or taken more from art. The Duchess had quickly reached her kinsman with a smothered hiss, an “Edward dear, for God’s sake take Aggie!” and at the end of a few minutes had formed for herself in one of Mrs. Brookenham’s admirable “corners” a society consisting of Lord Petherton and Mr. Mitchett, the latter of whom regarded Mrs. Donner across the room with articulate wonder and compassion.

“It’s all right, it’s all right — she’s frightened only at herself!”

The Duchess watched her as from a box at the play, comfortably shut in, as in the old operatic days at

Naples, with a pair of entertainers. “You’re the most interesting nation in the world. One never gets to the end of your hatred of the nuance. The sense of the suitable, the harmony of parts — what on earth were you doomed to do that, to be punished sufficiently in advance, you had to be deprived of it in your very cradles? Look at her little black dress — rather good, but not so good as it ought to be, and, mixed up with all the rest, see her type, her beauty, her timidity, her wickedness, her notoriety and her impudeur. It’s only in this country that a woman is both so shocking and so shaky.” The Duchess’s displeasure overflowed. “If she doesn’t know how to be good—”

“Let her at least know how to be bad? Ah,” Mitchy replied, “your irritation testifies more than anything else could do to our peculiar genius or our peculiar want of it. Our vice is intolerably clumsy — if it can possibly be a question of vice in regard to that charming child, who looks like one of the new-fashioned bill-posters, only, in the way of ‘morbid modernity,’ as Mrs. Brook would say, more extravagant and funny than any that have yet been risked. I remember,” he continued, “Mrs. Brook’s having spoken of her to me lately as ‘wild.’ Wild? — why, she’s simply tameness run to seed. Such an expression shows the state of training to which Mrs. Brook has reduced the rest of us.”

“It doesn’t prevent at any rate, Mrs. Brook’s training, some of the rest of you from being horrible,” the Duchess declared. “What did you mean just now, really, by asking me to explain before Aggie this so serious matter of Nanda’s exposure?” Then instantly taking herself up before Mr. Mitchett could answer: “What on earth do you suppose Edward’s saying to my darling?”

Brookenham had placed himself, side by side with the child, on a distant little settee, but it was impossible to make out from the countenance of either if a sound had passed between them. Aggie’s little manner was too developed to show, and her host’s not developed enough. “Oh he’s awfully careful,” Lord Petherton reassuringly observed. “If you or I or Mitchy say anything bad it’s sure to be before we know it and without particularly meaning it. But old Edward means it—”

“So much that as a general thing he doesn’t dare to say it?” the Duchess asked. “That’s a pretty picture of him, inasmuch as for the most part he never speaks. What therefore must he mean?”

“He’s an abyss — he’s magnificent!” Mr. Mitchett laughed. “I don’t know a man of an understanding more profound, and he’s equally incapable of uttering and of wincing. If by the same token I’m ‘horrible,’ as you call me,” he pursued, “it’s only because I’m in everyway so beastly superficial. All the same I do sometimes go into things, and I insist on knowing,” he again broke out, “what it exactly was you had in mind in saying to Mrs. Brook the things about Nanda and myself that she repeated to me.”

“You ‘insist,’ you silly man?” — the Duchess had veered a little to indulgence. “Pray on what ground of right, in such a connexion, do you do anything of the sort?”

Poor Mitchy showed but for a moment that he felt pulled up. “Do you mean that when a girl liked by a fellow likes him so little in return — ?”

“I don’t mean anything,” said the Duchess, “that may provoke you to suppose me vulgar and odious enough to try to put you out of conceit of a most interesting and unfortunate creature; and I don’t quite as yet see — though I dare say I shall soon make out! — what our friend has in her head in tattling to you on these matters as soon as my back’s turned. Petherton will tell you — I wonder he hasn’t told you before — why Mrs. Grendon, though not perhaps herself quite the rose, is decidedly in these days too near it.”

“Oh Petherton never tells me anything!” Mitchy’s answer was brisk and impatient, but evidently quite as sincere as if the person alluded to had not been there.

The person alluded to meanwhile, fidgeting frankly in his chair, alternately stretching his legs and resting his elbows on his knees, had reckoned as small the profit he might derive from this colloquy. His bored state indeed — if he was bored — prompted in him the honest impulse to clear, as he would have perhaps considered it, the atmosphere. He indicated Mrs. Donner with a remarkable absence of precautions. “Why, what the Duchess alludes to is my poor sister Fanny’s stupid grievance — surely you know about that.” He made oddly vivid for a moment the nature of his relative’s allegation, his somewhat cynical treatment of which became peculiarly derisive in the light of the attitude and expression, at that minute, of the figure incriminated. “My brother-in-law’s too thick with her. But Cashmore’s such a fine old ass. It’s excessively unpleasant,” he added, “for affairs are just in that position in which, from one day to another, there may be something that people will get hold of. Fancy a man,” he robustly reflected while the three took in more completely the subject of Mrs. Brookenham’s attention— “fancy a man with THAT odd piece on his hands! The beauty of it is that the two women seem never to have broken off. Blest if they don’t still keep seeing

each other!"

The Duchess, as on everything else, passed succinctly on this. "Ah how can hatreds comfortably flourish without the nourishment of such regular 'seeing' as what you call here bosom friendship alone supplies? What are parties given for in London but — that enemies may meet? I grant you it's inconceivable that the husband of a superb creature like your sister should find his requirements better met by an object comme cette petite, who looks like a pen-wiper — an actress's idea of one — made up for a theatrical bazaar. At the same time, if you'll allow me to say so, it scarcely strikes one that your sister's prudence is such as to have placed all the cards in her hands. She's the most beautiful woman in England, but her esprit de conduite isn't quite on a level. One can't have everything!" she philosophically sighed.

Lord Petherton met her comfortably enough on this assumption of his detachments. "If you mean by that her being the biggest fool alive I'm quite ready to agree with you. It's exactly what makes me afraid. Yet how can I decently say in especial," he asked, "of what?"

The Duchess still perched on her critical height. "Of what but one of your amazing English periodical public washings of dirty linen? There's not the least necessity to 'say'!" she laughed. "If there's anything more remarkable than these purifications it's the domestic comfort with which, when all has come and gone, you sport the articles purified."

"It comes back, in all that sphere," Mr. Mitchett instructively opined, "to our national, our fatal want of style. We can never, dear Duchess, take too many lessons, and there's probably at the present time no more useful function to be performed among us than that dissemination of neater methods to which you're so good as to contribute."

He had had another idea, but before he reached it his companion had gaily broken in. "Awfully good one for you, Duchess — and I'm bound to say that, for a clever woman, you exposed yourself! I've at any rate a sense of comfort," Lord Petherton pursued, "in the good relations now more and more established between poor Fanny and Mrs. Brook. Mrs. Brook's awfully kind to her and awfully sharp, and Fanny will take things from her that she won't take from me. I keep saying to Mrs. Brook — don't you know?— 'Do keep hold of her and let her have it strong.' She hasn't, upon my honour, any one in the world but me."

"And we know the extent of THAT resource!" the Duchess freely commented.

"That's exactly what Fanny says — that SHE knows it," Petherton good-humouredly agreed. "She says my beastly hypocrisy makes her sick. There are people," he pleasantly rambled on, "who are awfully free with their advice, but it's mostly fearful rot. Mrs. Brook's isn't, upon my word — I've tried some myself!"

"You talk as if it were something nasty and homemade — gooseberry wine!" the Duchess laughed; "but one can't know the dear soul, of course, without knowing that she has set up, for the convenience of her friends, a little office for consultations. She listens to the case, she strokes her chin and prescribes—"

"And the beauty of it is," cried Lord Petherton, "that she makes no charge whatever!"

"She doesn't take a guinea at the time, but you may still get your account," the Duchess returned. "Of course we know that the great business she does is in husbands and wives."

"This then seems the day of the wives!" Mr. Mitchett interposed as he became aware, the first, of the illustration the Duchess's image was in the act of receiving. "Lady Fanny Cashmore!" — the butler was already in the field, and the company, with the exception of Mrs. Donner, who remained seated, was apparently conscious of a vibration that brought it afresh, but still more nimbly than on Aggie's advent, to its feet.

VI

"Go to her straight — be nice to her: you must have plenty to say. YOU stay with me — we have our affair." The latter of these commands the Duchess addressed to Mr. Mitchett, while their companion, in obedience to the former and affected, as it seemed, by an unrepressed familiar accent that stirred a fresh flicker of Mitchy's grin, met the new arrival in the middle of the room before Mrs. Brookenham had had time to reach her. The Duchess, quickly reseated, watched an instant the inexpressive concussion of the tall brother and sister; then while Mitchy again subsided into his place, "You're not, as a race, clever, you're not delicate, you're not sane, but you're capable of extraordinary good looks," she resumed. "Vous avez parfois la grande beaute."

Mitchy was much amused. "Do you really think Petherton has?"

The Duchess withstood it. "They've got, both outside and in, the same great general things, only turned, in each, rather different ways, a way safer for him as a man, and more triumphant for her as — whatever you choose to call her! What CAN a woman do," she richly mused, "with such beauty as that — ?"

"Except come desperately to advise with Mrs. Brook" — Mitchy undertook to complete her question— "as to the highest use to make of it? But see," he immediately added, "how perfectly competent to instruct her our friend now looks." Their hostess had advanced to Lady Fanny with an outstretched hand but with an eagerness of greeting merged a little in the sweet predominance of wonder as well as in the habit, at such moments most perceptible, of the languid lily-bend. Nothing in general could have been less conventionally poor than the kind of reception given in Mrs. Brookenham's drawing-room to the particular element — the element of physical splendour void of those disparities that make the question of others tiresome — comprised in Lady Fanny's presence. It was a place in which, at all times, before interesting objects, the unanimous occupants, almost more concerned for each other's vibrations than for anything else, were apt rather more to exchange sharp and silent searchings than to fix their eyes on the object itself. In the case of Lady Fanny, however, the object itself — and quite by the same law that had worked, though less profoundly, on the entrance of little Aggie — superseded the usual rapt communion very much in the manner of some beautiful tame tigress who might really coerce attention. There was in Mrs. Brookenham's way of looking up at her a dim despairing abandonment of the idea of any common personal ground. Lady Fanny, magnificent, simple, stupid, had almost the stature of her brother, a forehead unsurpassably low and an air of sombre concentration just sufficiently corrected by something in her movements that failed to give it a point. Her blue eyes were heavy in spite of being perhaps a couple of shades too clear, and the wealth of her black hair, the disposition of the massive coils of which was all her own, had possibly a satin sheen depreciated by the current fashion. But the great thing in her was that she was, with unconscious heroism, thoroughly herself; and what were Mrs. Brook and Mrs. Brook's intimates after all, in their free surrender to the play of perception, but a happy association for keeping her so? The Duchess was moved to the liveliest admiration by the grand simple sweetness of her encounter with Mrs. Donner, a combination indeed in which it was a question if she or Mrs. Brook appeared to the higher advantage. It was poor Mrs. Donner — not, like Mrs. Brook, subtle in sufficiency, nor, like Lady Fanny, almost too simple — who made the poorest show. The Duchess immediately marked it to Mitchy as infinitely characteristic that their hostess, instead of letting one of her visitors go, kept them together by some sweet ingenuity and while Lord Petherton, dropping his sister, joined Edward and Aggie in the other angle, sat there between them as if, in pursuance of some awfully clever line of her own, she were holding a hand of each. Mr. Mitchett of course did justice all round, or at least, as would have seemed from an enquiry he presently made, wished not to fail of it. "Is it your real impression then that Lady Fanny has serious grounds—"

"For jealousy of that preposterous little person? My dear Mitchett," the Duchess resumed after a moment's reflexion, "if you're so rash as to ask me in any of these connexions for my 'real' impression you deserve whatever you may get." The penalty Mitchy had incurred was apparently grave enough to make his companion just falter in the infliction of it; which gave him the opportunity of replying that the little person was perhaps not more preposterous than any one else, that there was something in her he rather liked, and that there were many different ways in which a woman could be interesting. This further levity it was therefore that laid him fully open. "Do you mean to say you've been living with Petherton so long without becoming aware that he's shockingly worried?"

"My dear Duchess," Mitchy smiled, "Petherton carries his worries with a bravery! They're so many that

I've long since ceased to count them; and in general I've been disposed to let those pass that I can't help him to meet. YOU'VE made, I judge," he went on, "a better use of opportunities perhaps not so good — such as at any rate enables you to see further than I into the meaning of the impatience he just now expressed."

The Duchess was admirable, in conversation, for neglecting everything not essential to her present plausibility. "A woman like Lady Fanny can have no 'grounds' for anything — for any indignation, I mean, or for any revenge worth twopence. In this particular case at all events they've been sacrificed with such extravagance that, as an injured wife, she hasn't had the gumption to keep back an inch or two to stand on. She can do absolutely nothing."

"Then you take the view — ?" Mitchy, who had, after all, his delicacies, pulled up as at sight of a name.

"I take the view," said the Duchess, "and I know exactly why. Elle se les passe — her little fancies! She's a phenomenon, poor dear. And all with — what shall I call it? — the absence of haunting remorse of a good house-mother who makes the family accounts balance. She looks — and it's what they love her for here when they say 'Watch her now!' — like an angry saint; but she's neither a saint nor, to be perfectly fair to her, really angry at all. She has only just enough reflexion to make out that it may some day be a little better for her that her husband shall, on his side too, have committed himself; and she's only, in secret, too pleased to be sure whom it has been with. All the same I must tell you," the Duchess still more crisply added, "that our little friend Nanda is of the opinion — which I gather her to be quite ready to defend — that Lady Fanny's wrong."

Poor Mitchy found himself staring. "But what has our little friend Nanda to do with it?"

"What indeed, bless her heart? If you WILL ask questions, however, you must take, as I say, your risks. There are days when between you all you stupefy me. One of them was when I happened about a month ago to make some allusion to the charming example of Mr. Cashmore's fine taste that we have there before us: what was my surprise at the tone taken by Mrs. Brook to deny on this little lady's behalf the soft impeachment? It was quite a mistake that anything had happened — Mrs. Donner had pulled through unscathed. She had been but a day or two at the most in danger, for her family and friends — the best influences — had rallied to her support: the flurry was all over. She was now perfectly safe. Do you think she looks so?" the Duchess asked.

This was not a point that Mitchy was conscious of freedom of mind to examine. "Do I understand you that Nanda was her mother's authority — ?"

"For the exact shade of the intimacy of the two friends and the state of Mrs. Brook's information? Precisely — it was 'the latest before going to press.' 'Our own correspondent'! Her mother quoted her."

Mr. Mitchett visibly wondered. "But how should Nanda know — ?"

"Anything about the matter? How should she NOT know everything? You've not, I suppose, lost sight of the fact that this lady and Mrs. Grendon are sisters. Carrie's situation and Carrie's perils are naturally very present to the extremely unoccupied Tishy, who is unhappily married into the bargain, who has no children, and whose house, as you may imagine, has a good thick atmosphere of partisanship. So, as with Nanda, on HER side, there's no more absorbing interest than her dear friend Tishy, with whom she's at present staying and under whose roof she perpetually meets this victim of unjust aspersions — !"

"I see the whole thing from here, you imply?" Mr. Mitchett, under the influence of this rapid evocation, had already taken his line. "Well," he said bravely, "Nanda's not a fool."

A momentary silence on the part of the Duchess might have been her tribute to his courage. "No. I don't agree with her, as it happens, here; but that there are matters as to which she's not in general at all befogged is exactly the worst I ever said of her. And I hold that in putting it so — on the basis of my little anecdote — you clearly give out that you're answered."

Mitchy turned it over. "Answered?"

"In the quarrel that a while back you sought to pick with me. What I touched on to her mother was the peculiar range of aspects and interests she's compelled to cultivate by the special intimacies that Mrs. Brook permits her. There they are — and that's all I said. Judge them for yourself."

The Duchess had risen as she spoke, which was also what Mrs. Donner and Mrs. Brookenham had done; and Mr. Mitchett was on his feet as well, to act on this last admonition. Mrs. Donner was taking leave, and there occurred among the three ladies in connexion with the circumstance a somewhat striking exchange of endearments. Mr. Mitchett, observing this, expressed himself suddenly as diverted. "By Jove, they're kissing — she's in Lady Fanny's arms!" But his hilarity was still to deepen. "And Lady Fanny, by Jove, is in Mrs.

Brook's!"

"Oh it's all beyond ME!" the Duchess cried; and the little wail of her baffled imagination had almost the austerity of a complaint.

"Not a bit — they're all right. Mrs. Brook has acted!" Mitchy went on.

"Ah it isn't that she doesn't 'act'!" his interlocutress ejaculated.

Mrs. Donner's face presented, as she now crossed the room, something that resembled the ravage of a death-struggle between its artificial and its natural elegance. "Well," Mitchy said with decision as he caught it — "I back Nanda." And while a whiff of derision reached him from the Duchess, "Nothing HAS happened!" he murmured.

As to reward him for an indulgence that she must much more have divined than overheard the visitor approached him with her sweet bravery of alarm. "I go on Thursday to my sister's, where I shall find Nanda Brookenham. Can I take her any message from you?"

Mr. Mitchett showed a rosiness that might positively have been reflected. "Why should you dream of her expecting one?"

"Oh," said the Duchess with a cheer that but half carried off her asperity, "Mrs. Brook must have told Mrs. Donner to ask you!"

The latter lady, at this, rested strange eyes on the speaker, and they had perhaps something to do with a quick flare of Mitchy's wit. "Tell her, please — if, as I suppose, you came here to ask the same of her mother — that I adore her still more for keeping in such happy relations with you as enable me thus to meet you."

Mrs. Donner, overwhelmed, took flight with a nervous laugh, leaving Mr. Mitchett and the Duchess still confronted. Nothing had passed between the two ladies, yet it was as if there were a trace of something in the eyes of the elder, which, during a moment's silence, moved from the retreating visitor, now formally taken over at the door by Edward Brookenham, to Lady Fanny and her hostess, who, in spite of the embraces just performed, had again subsided together while Mrs. Brook gazed up in exalted intelligence. "It's a funny house," said the Duchess at last. "She makes me such a scene over my not bringing Aggie, and still more over my very faint hint of my reasons for it, that I fly off, in compunction, to do what I can, on the spot, to repair my excess of prudence. I reappear, panting, with my niece — and it's to THIS company I introduce her!"

Her companion looked at the charming child, to whom Lord Petherton was talking with evident kindness and gaiety — a conjunction that evidently excited Mitchy's interest. "May WE then know her?" he asked with an effect of drollery. "May I — if HE may?"

The Duchess's eyes, turned to him, had taken another light. He even gaped a little at their expression, which was in a manner carried out by her tone. "Go and talk to her, you perverse creature, and send him over to me." Lord Petherton, a minute later, had joined her; old Edward had left the room with Mrs. Donner; his wife and Lady Fanny were still more closely engaged; and the young Agnesina, though visibly a little scared at Mitchy's queer countenance, had begun, after the fashion he had touched on to Mrs. Brook, politely to invoke the aid of the idea of habit. "Look here — you must help me," the Duchess said to Petherton. "You can, perfectly — and it's the first thing I've yet asked of you."

"Oh, oh, oh!" her interlocutor laughed.

"I must have Mitchy," she went on without noticing his particular shade of humour.

"Mitchy too?" — he appeared to wish to leave her in no doubt of it.

"How low you are!" she simply said. "There are times when I despair of you. He's in every way your superior, and I like him so that — well, he must like HER. Make him feel that he does."

Lord Petherton turned it over as something put to him practically. "I could wish for him that he would. I see in her possibilities — !" he continued to laugh.

"I dare say you do. I see them in Mitchett, and I trust you'll understand me when I say I appeal to you."

"Appeal to HIM straight. That's much better," Petherton lucidly observed.

The Duchess wore for a moment her proudest air, which made her, in the connexion, exceptionally gentle. "He doesn't like me."

Her interlocutor looked at her with all his bright brutality. "Oh my dear, I can speak for you — if THAT'S what you want!"

The Duchess met his eyes, and so for an instant they sounded each other. "You're so abysmally coarse that I often wonder — !" But as the door reopened she caught herself. It was the effect of a face apparently directed at her. "Be quiet. Here's old Edward."

BOOK THIRD. MR. LONGDON

If Mitchy arrived exactly at the hour it was quite by design and on a calculation — over and above the prized little pleasure it might give him — of ten minutes clear with his host, whom it rarely befell him to see alone. He had a theory of something special to go into, of a plummet to sink or a feeler to put forth; his state of mind in short was diplomatic and anxious. But his hopes had a drop as he crossed the threshold. His precaution had only assured him the company of a stranger, for the person in the room to whom the servant announced him was not old Van. On the other hand this gentleman would clearly be old — what was it? the fellow Vanderbank had made it a matter of such importance he should "really know." But were they then simply to have tea there together? No; the candidate for Mr. Mitchett's acquaintance, as if quickly guessing his apprehension, mentioned on the spot that their entertainer would be with them: he had just come home in a hurry, fearing he was late, and then had rushed off to make a change. "Fortunately," said the speaker, who offered his explanation as if he had had it on his mind— "fortunately the ladies haven't yet come."

"Oh there ARE to be ladies?" — Mr. Mitchett was all response. His fellow guest, who was shy and apparently nervous, sidled about a little, swinging an eye-glass, yet glancing in a manner a trifle birdlike from object to object. "Mrs. Edward Brookenham I think."

"Oh!" Mitchy himself felt, as soon as this comment had quitted his lips, that it might sound even to a stranger like a sign, such as the votaries of Mrs. Edward Brookenham had fallen into the way of constantly throwing off, that he recognised her hand in the matter. There was, however, something in his entertainer's face that somehow encouraged frankness; it had the sociability of surprise — it hadn't the chill. Mitchy saw at the same time that this friend of old Van's would never really understand him; though that was a thing he at times liked people as much for as he liked them little for it at others. It was in fact when he most liked that he was on the whole most tempted to mystify. "Only Mrs. Brook? — no others?"

"'Mrs. Brook'?" his elder echoed; staring an instant as if literally missing the connexion; but quickly after, to show he was not stupid — and indeed it seemed to show he was delightful — smiling with extravagant intelligence. "Is that the right thing to say?"

Mitchy gave the kindest of laughs. "Well, I dare say I oughtn't to."

"Oh I didn't mean to correct you," his interlocutor hastened to profess; "I meant on the contrary, will it be right for me too?"

Mitchy's great goggle attentively fixed him. "Try it."

"To HER?"

"To every one."

"To her husband?"

"Oh to Edward," Mitchy laughed again, "perfectly!"

"And must I call him 'Edward'?"

"Whatever you do will be right," Mitchy returned— "even though it should happen to be sometimes what I do."

His companion, as if to look at him with a due appreciation of this, stopped swinging the nippers and put them on. "You people here have a pleasant way — !"

"Oh we HAVE!" — Mitchy, taking him up, was gaily emphatic. He began, however, already to perceive the mystification which in this case was to be his happy effect.

"Mr. Vanderbank," his victim remarked with perhaps a shade more of reserve, "has told me a good deal about you." Then as if, in a finer manner, to keep the talk off themselves: "He knows a great many ladies."

"Oh yes, poor chap, he can't help it. He finds a lady wherever he turns."

The stranger took this in, but seemed a little to challenge it. "Well, that's reassuring, if one sometimes fancies there are fewer."

"Fewer than there used to be? — I see what you mean," said Mitchy. "But if it has struck you so, that's awfully interesting." He glared and grinned and mused. "I wonder."

"Well, we shall see." His friend seemed to wish not to dogmatise.

"SHALL we?" Mitchy considered it again in its high suggestive light. "You will — but how shall I?" Then he caught himself up with a blush. "What a beastly thing to say — as if it were mere years that make you see it!"

His companion this time gave way to the joke. “What else can it be — if I’ve thought so?”

“Why, it’s the facts themselves, and the fine taste, and above all something qui ne court pas les rues, an approach to some experience of what a lady IS.” The young man’s acute reflexion appeared suddenly to flower into a vision of opportunity that swept everything else away. “Excuse my insisting on your time of life — but you HAVE seen some?” The question was of such interest that he had already begun to follow it. “Oh the charm of talk with some one who can fill out one’s idea of the really distinguished women of the past! If I could get you,” he continued, “to be so awfully valuable as to fill out mine!”

His fellow visitor, on this, made, in a pause, a nearer approach to taking visibly his measure. “Are you sure you’ve got an idea?” Mr. Mitchett brightly thought. “No. That must be just why I appeal to you. And it can’t therefore be for confirmation, can it?” he went on. “It must be for the beautiful primary hint altogether.”

His interlocutor began, with a shake of the eyeglass, to shift and sidle again, as if distinctly excited by the subject. But it was as if his very excitement made the poor gentleman a trifle coy. “Are there no nice ones now?”

“Oh yes, there must be lots. In fact I know quantities.”

This had the effect of pulling the stranger up. “Ah ‘quantities’! There it is.”

“Yes,” said Mitchy, “fancy the ‘lady’ in her millions. Have you come up to London, wondering, as you must, about what’s happening — for Vanderbank mentioned, I think, that you HAVE come up — in pursuit of her?”

“Ah,” laughed the subject of Vanderbank’s information, “I’m afraid ‘pursuit,’ with me, is over.”

“Why, you’re at the age,” Mitchy returned, “of — the most exquisite form of it. Observation.”

“Yet it’s a form, I seem to see, that you’ve not waited for my age to cultivate.” This was followed by a decisive headshake. “I’m not an observer. I’m a hater.”

“That only means,” Mitchy explained, “that you keep your observation for your likes — which is more admirable than prudent. But between my fear in the one direction and my desire in the other,” he lightly added, “I scarcely know how to present myself. I must study the ground. Meanwhile HAS old Van told you much about me?”

Old Van’s possible confidant, instead of immediately answering, again assumed the pince-nez. “Is that what you call him?”

“In general, I think — for shortness.”

“And also” — the speaker hesitated— “for esteem?”

Mitchy laughed out. “For veneration! Our disrespects, I think, are all tender, and we wouldn’t for the world do to a person we don’t like anything so nice as to call him, or even to call her, don’t you know — ?”

His questioner had quickly looked as if he knew. “Something pleasant and vulgar?”

Mitchy’s gaiety deepened. “That discrimination’s our only austerity. You must fall in.”

“Then what will you call ME?”

“What can we?” After which, sustainingly, “I’m ‘Mitchy,’” our friend stated.

His interlocutor looked slightly queer. “I don’t think I can quite begin. I’m Mr. Longdon,” he almost blushed to articulate.

“Absolutely and essentially — that’s exactly what I recognise. I defy any one to see you,” Mitchy declared, “as anything else, and on that footing you’ll be, among us, unique.”

Mr. Longdon appeared to accept his prospect of isolation with a certain gravity. “I gather from you — I’ve gathered indeed from Mr. Vanderbank — that you’re a little sort of a set that hang very much together.”

“Oh yes; not a formal association nor a secret society — still less a ‘dangerous gang’ or an organisation for any definite end. We’re simply a collection of natural affinities,” Mitchy explained; “meeting perhaps principally in Mrs. Brook’s drawing-room — though sometimes also in old Van’s, as you see, sometimes even in mine — and governed at any rate everywhere by Mrs. Brook, in our mysterious ebbs and flows, very much as the tides are governed by the moon. As I say,” Mitchy pursued, “you must join. But if Van has got hold of you,” he added, “or you’ve got hold of him, you HAVE joined. We’re not quite so numerous as I could wish, and we want variety; we want just what I’m sure you’ll bring us — a fresh eye, an outside mind.”

Mr. Longdon wore for a minute the air of a man knowing but too well what it was to be asked to put down his name. “My friend Vanderbank swaggers so little that it’s rather from you than from himself that I seem to catch the idea — !”

“Of his being a great figure among us? I don’t know what he may have said to you or have suppressed; but

you can take it from me — as between ourselves, you know — that he's very much the best of us. Old Van in fact — if you really want a candid opinion," and Mitchy shone still brighter as he talked, "is formed for a distinctly higher sphere. I should go so far as to say that on our level he's positively wasted."

"And are you very sure you're not?" Mr. Longdon asked with a smile.

"Dear no — I'm in my element. My element's to grovel before Van. You've only to look at me, as you must already have made out, to see I'm everything dreadful that he isn't. But you've seen him for yourself — I needn't tell you!" Mitchy sighed.

Mr. Longdon, as under the coercion of so much confidence, had stood in place longer than for any previous moment, and the spell continued for a minute after Mitchy had paused. Then nervously and abruptly he turned away, his friend watching him rather aimlessly wander. "Our host has spoken of you to me in high terms," he said as he came back. "You'd have no fault to find with them."

Mitchy took it with his highest light. "I know from your taking the trouble to remember that, how much what I've said of him pleases and touches you. We're a little sort of religion then, you and I; we're an organisation of two, at any rate, and we can't help ourselves. There — that's settled." He glanced at the clock on the chimney. "But what's the matter with him?"

"You gentlemen dress so much," said Mr. Longdon.

Mitchy met the explanation quite halfway. "*I* try to look funny — but why should Apollo in person?"

Mr. Longdon weighed it. "Do you think him like Apollo?"

"The very image. Ask any of the women!"

"But do *I* know — ?"

"How Apollo must look?" Mitchy considered. "Why the way it works is that it's just from Van's appearance they get the tip, and that then, don't you see? they've their term of comparison. Isn't it what you call a vicious circle? I borrow a little their vice."

Mr. Longdon, who had once more been arrested, once more sidled away. Then he spoke from the other side of the expanse of a table covered with books for which the shelves had no space — covered with portfolios, with well-worn leather-cased boxes, with documents in neat piles. The place was a miscellany, yet not a litter, the picture of an admirable order. "If we're a fond association of two, you and I, let me, accepting your idea, do what, this way, under a gentleman's roof and while enjoying his hospitality, I should in ordinary circumstances think perhaps something of a breach."

"Oh strike out!" Mitchy laughed. It possibly chilled his interlocutor, who again hung fire so long that he himself at last adopted his image. "Why doesn't he marry, you mean?"

Mr. Longdon fairly flushed with recognition. "You're very deep, but with what we perceive — why doesn't he?"

Mitchy continued visibly to have his amusement, which might have been, this time and in spite of the amalgamation he had pictured, for what "they" perceived. But he threw off after an instant an answer clearly intended to meet the case. "He thinks he hasn't the means. He has great ideas of what a fellow must offer a woman."

Mr. Longdon's eyes travelled a while over the amenities about him. "He hasn't such a view of himself alone — ?"

"As to make him think he's enough as he stands? No," said Mitchy, "I don't fancy he has a very awful view of himself alone. And since we ARE burning this incense under his nose," he added, "it's also my impression that he has no private means. Women in London cost so much."

Mr. Longdon had a pause. "They come very high, I dare say."

"Oh tremendously. They want so much — they want everything. I mean the sort of women he lives with. A modest man — who's also poor — isn't in it. I give you that at any rate as his view. There are lots of them that would — and only too glad— 'love him for himself'; but things are much mixed, and these not necessarily the right ones, and at all events he doesn't see it. The result of which is that he's waiting."

"Waiting to feel himself in love?"

Mitchy just hesitated. "Well, we're talking of marriage. Of course you'll say there are women with money. There ARE" — he seemed for a moment to meditate— "dreadful ones!"

The two men, on this, exchanged a long regard. "He mustn't do that."

Mitchy again hesitated. "He won't."

Mr. Longdon had also a silence, which he presently terminated by one of his jerks into motion. "He

shan't!"

Once more Mitchy watched him revolve a little, but now, familiarly yet with a sharp emphasis, he himself resumed their colloquy. "See here, Mr. Longdon. Are you seriously taking him up?"

Yet again, at the tone of this appeal, the old man perceptibly coloured. It was as if his friend had brought to the surface an inward excitement, and he laughed for embarrassment. "You see things with a freedom—"

"Yes, and it's so I express them. I see them, I know, with a raccourci; but time after all rather presses, and at any rate we understand each other. What I want now is just to say" — and Mitchy spoke with a simplicity and a gravity he had not yet used— "that if your interest in him should at any time reach the point of your wishing to do something or other (no matter what, don't you see?) FOR him — !"

Mr. Longdon, as he faltered, appeared to wonder, but emitted a sound of gentleness. "Yes?"

"Why," said the stimulated Mitchy, "do, for God's sake, just let me have a finger in it."

Mr. Longdon's momentary mystification was perhaps partly but the natural effect of constitutional prudence. "A finger?"

"I mean — let me help."

"Oh!" breathed the old man thoughtfully and without meeting his eyes.

Mitchy, as if with more to say, watched him an instant, then before speaking caught himself up. "Look out — here he comes."

Hearing the stir of the door by which he had entered he looked round; but it opened at first only to admit Vanderbank's servant. "Miss Brookenham!" the man announced; on which the two gentlemen in the room were — audibly, almost violently — precipitated into a union of surprise.

II

However she might have been discussed Nanda was not one to shrink, for, though she drew up an instant on failing to find in the room the person whose invitation she had obeyed, she advanced the next moment as if either of the gentlemen before her would answer as well. “How do you do, Mr. Mitchy? How do you do, Mr. Longdon?” She made no difference for them, speaking to the elder, whom she had not yet seen, as if they were already acquainted. There was moreover in the air of that personage at this juncture little to invite such a confidence: he appeared to have been startled, in the oddest manner, into stillness and, holding out no hand to meet her, only stared rather stiffly and without a smile. An observer disposed to interpret the scene might have fancied him a trifle put off by the girl’s familiarity, or even, as by a singular effect of her self-possession, stricken into deeper diffidence. This self-possession, however, took on her own part no account of any awkwardness: it seemed the greater from the fact that she was almost unnaturally grave, and it overflowed in the immediate challenge: “Do you mean to say Van isn’t here? I’ve come without mother — she said I could, to see HIM,” she went on, addressing herself more particularly to Mitchy. “But she didn’t say I might do anything of that sort to see YOU.”

If there was something serious in Nanda and something blank in their companion, there was, superficially at least, nothing in Mr. Mitchett but his usual flush of gaiety. “Did she really send you off this way alone?” Then while the girl’s face met his own with the clear confession of it: “Isn’t she too splendid for anything?” he asked with immense enjoyment. “What do you suppose is her idea?” Nanda’s eyes had now turned to Mr. Longdon, whom she fixed with her mild straightness; which led to Mitchy’s carrying on and repeating the appeal. “Isn’t Mrs. Brook charming? What do you suppose is her idea?”

It was a bound into the mystery, a bound of which his fellow visitor stood quite unconscious, only looking at Nanda still with the same coldness of wonder. All expression had for the minute been arrested in Mr. Longdon, but he at last began to show that it had merely been retarded. Yet it was almost with solemnity that he put forth his hand. “How do you do? How do you do? I’m so glad!”

Nanda shook hands with him as if she had done so already, though it might have been just her look of curiosity that detracted from her air of amusing herself. “Mother has wanted me awfully to see you. She told me to give you her love,” she said. Then she added with odd irrelevance: “I didn’t come in the carriage, nor in a cab nor an omnibus.”

“You came on a bicycle?” Mitchy enquired.

“No, I walked.” She still spoke without a gleam. “Mother wants me to do everything.”

“Even to walk!” Mitchy laughed. “Oh yes, we must in these times keep up our walking!” The ingenious observer just now suggested might even have detected in the still higher rise of this visitor’s spirits a want of mere inward ease.

She had taken no notice of the effect upon him of her mention of her mother, and she took none, visibly, of Mr. Longdon’s manner or of his words. What she did while the two men, without offering her, either, a seat, practically lost themselves in their deepening vision, was to give her attention all to the place, looking at the books, pictures and other significant objects, and especially at the small table set out for tea, to which the servant who had admitted her now returned with a steaming kettle. “Isn’t it charming here? Will there be any one else? Where IS Mr. Van? Shall I make tea?” There was just a faint quaver, showing a command of the situation more desired perhaps than achieved, in the very rapid sequence of these ejaculations. The servant meanwhile had placed the hot water above the little silver lamp and left the room.

“Do you suppose there’s anything the matter? Oughtn’t the man — or do you know our host’s room?” Mr. Longdon, addressing Mitchy with solicitude, yet began to show in a countenance less blank a return of his sense of relations. It was as if something had happened to him and he were in haste to convert the signs of it into an appearance of care for the proprieties.

“Oh,” said Mitchy, “Van’s only making himself beautiful” — which account of their absent entertainer gained a point from his appearance at the moment in the doorway furthest removed from the place where the three were gathered.

Vanderbank came in with friendly haste and with something of the look indeed — refreshed, almost rosy, brightly brushed and quickly buttoned — of emerging, out of breath, from pleasant ablutions and renewals. “What a brute to have kept you waiting! I came back from work quite begrimed. How d’ye do, how d’ye do,

how d'ye do? What's the matter with you, huddled there as if you were on a street-crossing? I want you to think this a refuge — but not of that kind!" he laughed. "Sit down, for heaven's sake; lie down — be happy! Of course you've made acquaintance all — except that Mitchy's so modest! Tea, tea!" — and he bustled to the table, where the next minute he appeared rather helpless. "Nanda, you blessed child, do YOU mind making it? How jolly of you! — are you all right?" He seemed, with this, for the first time, to be aware of somebody's absence. "Your mother isn't coming? She let you come alone? How jolly of her!" Pulling off her gloves Nanda had come immediately to his assistance; on which, quitting the table and laying hands on Mr. Longdon's shoulder to push him toward a sofa, he continued to talk, to sound a note of which the humour was the exaggeration of his flurry. "How jolly of you to be willing to come — most awfully kind! I hope she isn't ill? Do, Mitchy, lie down. Down, Mitchy, down! — that's the only way to keep you." He had waited for no account of Mrs. Brookenham's health, and it might have been apparent — still to our sharp spectator — that he found nothing wonderful in her daughter's unsupported arrival.

"I can make tea beautifully," she said from behind her table. "Mother showed me how this morning."

"This morning?" — and Mitchy, who, before the fire and still erect, had declined to be laid low, greeted the simple remark with uproarious mirth. "Dear young lady, you're the most delicious family!"

"She showed me at breakfast about the little things to do. She thought I might have to make it here and told me to offer," the girl went on. "I haven't yet done it this way at home — I usually have my tea upstairs. They bring it up in a cup, all made and very weak, with a piece of bread-and-butter in the saucer. That's because I'm so young. Tishy never lets me touch hers either; so we had to make up for lost time. That's what mother said" — she followed up her story, and her young distinctness had clearly something to do with a certain pale concentration in Mr. Longdon's face. "Mother isn't ill, but she told me already yesterday she wouldn't come. She said it's really all for ME. I'm sure I hope it is!" — with which there flickered in her eyes, dimly but perhaps all the more prettily, the first intimation they had given of the light of laughter. "She told me you'd understand, Mr. Van — from something you've said to her. It's for my seeing Mr. Longdon without — she thinks — her spoiling it."

"Oh my dear child, 'spoiling it'!" Vanderbank protested as he took a cup of tea from her to carry to their friend. "When did your mother ever spoil anything? I told her Mr. Longdon wanted to see you, but I didn't say anything of his not yearning also for the rest of the family."

A sound of protest rather formless escaped from the gentleman named, but Nanda continued to carry out her duty. "She told me to ask why he hadn't been again to see her. Mr. Mitchy, sugar? — isn't that the way to say it? Three lumps? You're like me, only that I more often take five." Mitchy had dashed forward for his tea; she gave it to him; then she added with her eyes on Mr. Longdon's, which she had had no difficulty in catching: "She told me to ask you all sorts of things."

This acquaintance had got up to take his cup from Vanderbank, whose hand, however, dealt with him on the question of his sitting down again. Mr. Longdon, resisting, kept erect with a low gasp that his host only was near enough to catch. This suddenly appeared to confirm an impression gathered by Vanderbank in their contact, a strange sense that his visitor was so agitated as to be trembling in every limb. It brought to his own lips a kind of ejaculation— "I SAY!" But even as he spoke Mr. Longdon's face, still white, but with a smile that was not all pain, seemed to supplicate him not to notice; and he was not a man to require more than this to achieve a divination as deep as it was rapid. "Why we've all been scattered for Easter, haven't we?" he asked of Nanda. "Mr. Longdon has been at home, your mother and father have been paying visits, I myself have been out of London, Mitchy has been to Paris, and you — oh yes, I know where you've been."

"Ah we all know that — there has been such a row made about it!" Mitchy said.

"Yes, I've heard of the feeling there is," Nanda replied.

"It's supposed to be awful, my knowing Tishy — quite too awful."

Mr. Longdon, with Vanderbank's covert aid, had begun to appear to have pulled himself together, dropping back on his sofa and attending in a manner to his tea. It might have been with the notion of showing himself at ease that he turned, on this, a benevolent smile to the girl. "But what, my dear, is the objection — ?"

She looked gravely from him to Vanderbank and to Mitchy, and then back again from one of these to the other. "Do you think I ought to say?"

They both laughed and they both just appeared uncertain, but Vanderbank spoke first. "I don't imagine, Nanda, that you really know."

"No — as a family, you're perfection!" Mitchy broke out. Before the fire again, with his cup, he addressed his hilarity to Mr. Longdon. "I told you a tremendous lot, didn't I? But I didn't tell you about that."

His elder maintained, yet with a certain vagueness, the attitude of amiable enquiry. "About the — a — family?"

"Well," Mitchy smiled, "about its ramifications. This young lady has a tremendous friendship — and in short it's all very complicated."

"My dear Nanda," said Vanderbank, "it's all very simple. Don't believe a word of anything of the sort."

He had spoken as with the intention of a large vague optimism; but there was plainly something in the girl that would always make for lucidity. "Do you mean about Carrie Donner? I DON'T believe it, and at any rate I don't think it's any one's business. I shouldn't have a very high opinion of a person who would give up a friend." She stopped short with the sense apparent that she was saying more than she meant, though, strangely, as if it had been an effect of her type and of her voice, there was neither pertness nor passion in the profession she had just made. Curiously wanting as she seemed both in timidity and in levity, she was to a certainty not self-conscious — she was extraordinarily simple. Mr. Longdon looked at her now with an evident surrender to his extreme interest, and it might well have perplexed him to see her at once so downright as from experience and yet of so fresh and sweet a tenderness of youth.

"That's right, that's right, my dear young lady: never, never give up a friend for anything any one says!" It was Mitchy who rang out with this lively wisdom, the action of which on Mr. Longdon — unless indeed it was the action of something else — was to make that personage, in a manner that held the others watching him in slight suspense, suddenly spring to his feet again, put down his teacup carefully on a table near and then without a word, as if no one had been present, quietly wander away and disappear through the door left open on Vanderbank's entrance. It opened into a second, a smaller sitting-room, into which the eyes of his companions followed him.

"What's the matter?" Nanda asked. "Has he been taken ill?"

"He IS 'rum,' my dear Van," Mitchy said; "but you're right — of a charm, a distinction! In short just the sort of thing we want."

"The sort of thing we 'want' — I dare say!" Vanderbank laughed. "But it's not the sort of thing that's to be had for the asking — it's a sort we shall be mighty lucky if we can get!"

Mitchy turned with amusement to Nanda. "Van has invented him and, with the natural greed of the inventor, won't let us have him cheap. Well," he went on, "I'll 'stand' my share."

"The difficulty is that he's so much too good for us," Vanderbank explained.

"Ungrateful wretch," his friend cried, "that's just what I've been telling him that YOU are! Let the return you make not be to deprive me — !"

"Mr. Van's not at all too good for ME, if you mean that," Nanda broke in. She had finished her tea-making and leaned back in her chair with her hands folded on the edge of the tray.

Vanderbank only smiled at her in silence, but Mitchy took it up. "There's nobody too good for you, of course; only you're not quite, don't you know? IN our set. You're in Mrs. Grendon's. I know what you're going to say — that she hasn't got any set, that she's just a loose little white flower dropped on the indifferent bosom of the world. But you're the small sprig of tender green that, added to her, makes her immediately 'compose.'"

Nanda looked at him with her cold kindness. "What nonsense you do talk!"

"Your tone's sweet to me," he returned, "as showing that you don't think ME, either, too good for you. No one, remember, will take that for your excuse when the world some day sees me annihilated by your having put an end to our so harmless relations."

The girl appeared to lose herself a moment in the — abysmal humanity over which his fairly fascinating ugliness played like the whirl of an eddy. "Martyr!" she gently exclaimed. But there was no smile with it. She turned to Vanderbank, who, during the previous minute, had moved toward the neighbouring room, then faltering, taking counsel of discretion, had come back on a scruple. "What IS the matter?"

"What do you want to get out of him, you wretch?" Mitchy went on as their host for an instant said nothing.

Vanderbank, whose handsome face had a fine thought in it, looked a trifle absently from one of them to the other; but it was to Nanda he spoke. "Do you like him, Nanda?"

She showed surprise at the question. "How can I know so soon?"

"HE knows already."

Mitchy, with his eyes on her, became radiant to interpret. "He knows that he's pierced to the heart!"

"The matter with him, as you call it," Vanderbank brought out, "is one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen." He looked at her as with a hope she'd understand. "Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful!"

"Precisely," Mitchy continued; "the victim done for by one glance of the goddess!"

Nanda, motionless in her chair, fixed her other friend with clear curiosity. "'Beautiful'? Why beautiful?"

Vanderbank, about to speak, checked himself.

"I won't spoil it. Have it from HIM!" — and, returning to their friend, he this time went out.

Mitchy and Nanda looked at each other. "But isn't it rather awful?" Mitchy demanded.

She got up without answering; she slowly came away from the table. "I think I do know if I like him."

"Well you may," Mitchy exclaimed, "after his putting before you probably, on the whole, the greatest of your triumphs."

"And I also know, I think, Mr. Mitchy, that I like YOU." She spoke without attention to this hyperbole.

"In spite of my ineffectual attempts to be brilliant? That's a joy," he went on, "if it's not drawn out by the mere clumsiness of my flattery." She had turned away from him, kindly enough, as if time for his talk in the air were always to be allowed him: she took in vaguely Vanderbank's books and prints. "Why didn't your mother come?" Mitchy then enquired.

At this she again looked at him. "Do you mention her as a way of alluding to something you guess she must have told me?"

"That I've always supposed I make your flesh creep? Yes," Mitchy admitted; "I see she must have said to you: 'Be nice to him, to show him it isn't quite so bad as that!' So you ARE nice — so you always WILL be nice. But I adore you, all the same, without illusions."

She had opened at one of the tables, unperceivingly, a big volume of which she turned the leaves. "Don't 'adore' a girl, Mr. Mitchy — just help her. That's more to the purpose."

"Help you?" he cried. "You bring tears to my eyes!"

"Can't a girl have friends?" she went on. "I never heard of anything so idiotic." Giving him, however, no chance to take her up on this, she made a quick transition. "Mother didn't come because she wants me now, as she says, more to share her own life."

Mitchy looked at it. "But is this the way for her to share yours?"

"Ah that's another matter — about which you must talk to HER. She wants me no longer to keep seeing only with her eyes. She's throwing me into the world."

Mitchy had listened with the liveliest interest, but he presently broke into a laugh. "What a good thing then that I'm there to catch you!"

Without — it might have been seen — having gathered the smallest impression of what they enclosed, she carefully drew together again the covers of her folio. There was deliberation in her movements. "I shall always be glad when you're there. But where do you suppose they've gone?" Her eyes were on what was visible of the other room, from which there arrived no sound of voices.

"They're off there," said Mitchy, "but just looking unutterable things about you. The impression's too deep. Let them look, and tell me meanwhile if Mrs. Donner gave you my message."

"Oh yes, she told me some humbug."

"The humbug then was in the tone my perfectly sincere speech took from herself. She gives things, I recognise, rather that sound. It's her weakness," he continued, "and perhaps even one may say her danger. All the more reason you should help her, as I believe you're supposed to be doing, aren't you? I hope you feel you are," he earnestly added.

He had spoken this time gravely enough, and with magnificent gravity Nanda replied. "I HAVE helped her. Tishy's sure I have. That's what Tishy wants me for. She says that to be with some nice girl's really the best thing for her."

Poor Mitchy's face hereupon would have been interesting, would have been distinctly touching to other eyes; but Nanda's were not heedful of it. "Oh," he returned after an instant and without profane mirth, "that seems to me the best thing for any one."

Vanderbank, however, might have caught his expression, for Vanderbank now reappeared, smiling on the pair as if struck by their intimacy. "How you ARE keeping it up!" Then to Nanda persuasively: "Do you mind going to him in there? I want him so really to see you. It's quite, you know, what he came for."

Nanda seemed to wonder. “What will he do to me? Anything dreadful?”

“He’ll tell you what I meant just now.”

“Oh,” said Nanda, “if he’s a person who can tell me sometimes what you mean — !” With which she went quickly off.

“And can’t *I* hear?” Mitchy asked of his host while they looked after her.

“Yes, but only from me.” Vanderbank had pushed him to a seat again and was casting about for cigarettes. “Be quiet and smoke, and I’ll tell you.”

Mitchy, on the sofa, received with meditation a light. “Will she understand? She has everything in the world but one,” he added. “But that’s half.”

Vanderbank, before him, lighted for himself. “What is it?”

“A sense of humour.”

“Oh yes, she’s serious.”

Mitchy smoked a little. “She’s tragic.”

His friend, at the fire, watched a moment the empty portion of the other room, then walked across to give the door a light push that all but closed it. “It’s rather odd,” he remarked as he came back— “that’s quite what I just said to him. But he won’t treat her to comedy.”

III

"Is it the shock of the resemblance to her grandmother?" Vanderbank had asked of Mr. Longdon on rejoining him in his retreat. This victim of memory, with his back turned, was gazing out of the window, and when in answer he showed his face there were tears in his eyes. His answer in fact was just these tears, the significance of which Vanderbank immediately recognised. "It's still greater then than you gathered from her photograph?"

"It's the most extraordinary thing in the world. I'm too absurd to be so upset" — Mr. Longdon smiled through his tears— "but if you had known Lady Julia you'd understand. It's SHE again, as I first knew her, to the life; and not only in feature, in stature, in colour, in movement, but in every bodily mark and sign, in every look of the eyes above all — oh to a degree! — in the sound, in the charm of the voice." He spoke low and confidentially, but with an intensity that now relieved him — he was as restless as with a discovery. He moved about as with a sacred awe — he might a few steps away have been in the very presence. "She's ALL Lady Julia. There isn't a touch of her mother. It's unique — an absolute revival. I see nothing of her father, I see nothing of any one else. Isn't it thought wonderful by every one?" he went on. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"To have prepared you a little?" — Vanderbank felt almost guilty. "I see — I should have liked to make more of it; though," he added all lucidly, "I might so, by putting you on your guard, have caused myself to lose what, if you'll allow me to say it, strikes me as one of the most touching tributes I've ever seen rendered to a woman. In fact, however, how could I know? I never saw Lady Julia, and you had in advance all the evidence I could have: the portrait — pretty bad, in the taste of the time, I admit — and the three or four photographs you must have noticed with it at Mrs. Brook's. These things must have compared themselves for you with my photograph in there of the granddaughter. The similarity of course we had all observed, but it has taken your wonderful memory and your happy vision to put into it all the detail."

Mr. Longdon thought a moment, giving a dab with his pocket-handkerchief. "Very true — you're quite right. It's far beyond any identity in the pictures. But why did you tell me," he added more sharply, "that she isn't beautiful?"

"You've deprived me," Vanderbank laughed, "of the power of expressing civilly any surprise at your finding her so. But I said to you, please remember, nothing that qualified a jot my sense of the special stamp of her face. I've always positively found in it a recall of the type of the period you must be thinking of. It isn't a bit modern. It's a face of Sir Thomas Lawrence—"

"It's a face of Gainsborough!" Mr. Longdon returned with spirit. "Lady Julia herself harked back."

Vanderbank, clearly, was equally touched and amused. "Let us say at once that it's a face of Raphael."

His old friend's hand was instantly on his arm. "That's exactly what I often said to myself of Lady Julia's."

"The forehead's a little too high," said Vanderbank.

"But it's just that excess that, with the exquisite eyes and the particular disposition round it of the fair hair, makes the individual grace, makes the beauty of the resemblance."

Released by Lady Julia's lover, the young man in turn grasped him as an encouragement to confidence. "It's a face that should have the long side-ringlets of 1830. It should have the rest of the personal arrangement, the pelisse, the shape of bonnet, the sprigged muslin dress and the cross-laced sandals. It should have arrived in a pea-green 'tilbury' and be a reader of Mrs. Radcliffe. And all this to complete the Raphael!"

Mr. Longdon, who, his discovery proclaimed, had begun, as might have been said, to live with it, looked hard a moment at his companion. "How you've observed her!"

Vanderbank met it without confusion. "Whom haven't I observed? Do you like her?" he then rather oddly and abruptly asked.

The old man broke away again. "How can I tell — with such disparities?"

"The manner must be different," Vanderbank suggested. "And the things she says."

His visitor was before him again. "I don't know what to make of them. They don't go with the rest of her. Lady Julia," said Mr. Longdon, "was rather shy."

On this too his host could meet him. "She must have been. And Nanda — yes, certainly — doesn't give that impression."

"On the contrary. But Lady Julia was gay!" he added with an eagerness that made Vanderbank smile.

“I can also see that. Nanda doesn’t joke. And yet,” Vanderbank continued with his exemplary candour, “we mustn’t speak of her, must we? as if she were bold and grim.”

Mr. Longdon fixed him. “Do you think she’s sad?”

They had preserved their lowered tone and might, with their heads together, have been conferring as the party “out” in some game with the couple in the other room. “Yes. Sad.” But Vanderbank broke off. “I’ll send her to you.” Thus it was he had come back to her.

Nanda, on joining the elder man, went straight to the point. “He says it’s so beautiful — what you feel on seeing me: if that IS what he meant.” Mr. Longdon kept silent again at first, only smiling at her, but less strangely now, and then appeared to look about him for some place where she could sit near him. There was a sofa in this room too, on which, observing it, she quickly sank down, so that they were presently together, placed a little sideways and face to face. She had shown perhaps that she supposed him to have wished to take her hand, but he forbore to touch her, though letting her feel all the kindness of his eyes and their long backward vision. These things she evidently felt soon enough; she went on before he had spoken. “I know how well you knew my grandmother. Mother has told me — and I’m so glad. She told me to say to you that she wants YOU to tell me.” Just a shade, at this, might have appeared to drop over his face, but who was there to know if the girl observed it? It didn’t prevent at any rate her completing her statement. “That’s why she wished me to-day to come alone. She said she wished you to have me all to yourself.”

No, decidedly, she wasn’t shy: that mute reflexion was in the air an instant. “That, no doubt, is the best way. I thank her very much. I called, after having had the honour of dining — I called, I think, three times,” he went on with a sudden displacement of the question; “but I had the misfortune each time to miss her.”

She kept looking at him with her crude young clearness. “I didn’t know about that. Mother thinks she’s more at home than almost any one. She does it on purpose: she knows what it is,” Nanda pursued with her perfect gravity, “for people to be disappointed of finding her.”

“Oh I shall find her yet,” said Mr. Longdon. “And then I hope I shall also find YOU.”

She appeared simply to consider the possibility and after an instant to think well of it. “I dare say you will now, for now I shall be down.”

Her companion just blinked. “In the drawing-room, you mean — always?”

It was quite what she meant. “Always. I shall see all the people who come. It will be a great thing for me. I want to hear all the talk. Mr. Mitchett says I ought to — that it helps to form the young mind. I hoped, for that reason,” she went on with the directness that made her honesty almost violent— “I hoped there would be more people here to-day.”

“I’m very glad there are not!” — the old man rang equally clear. “Mr. Vanderbank kindly arranged the matter for me just this way. I met him at dinner, at your mother’s, three weeks ago, and he brought me home here that night, when, as knowing you so differently, we took the liberty of talking you all over. It naturally had the effect of making me want to begin with you afresh — only that seemed difficult too without further help. This he good-naturedly offered me; he said” — and Mr. Longdon recovered his spirits to repeat it —”’Hang it, I’ll have ‘em here for you!’”

“I see — he knew we’d come.” Then she caught herself up. “But we haven’t come, have we?”

“Oh it’s all right — it’s all right. To me the occasion’s brilliant and the affluence great. I’ve had such talk with those young men—”

“I see” — she was again prompt, but beyond any young person he had ever met she might have struck him as literal. “You’re not used to such talk. Neither am I. It’s rather wonderful, isn’t it? They’re thought awfully clever, Mr. Van and Mr. Mitchy. Do you like them?” she pushed on.

Mr. Longdon, who, as compared with her, might have struck a spectator as infernally subtle, took an instant to think. “I’ve never met Mr. Mitchett before.”

“Well, he always thinks one doesn’t like him,” Nanda explained. “But one does. One ought to,” she added.

Her companion had another pause. “He likes YOU.”

Oh Mr. Longdon needn’t have hesitated! “I know he does. He has told mother. He has told lots of people.”

“He has told even you,” Mr. Longdon smiled.

“Yes — but that isn’t the same. I don’t think he’s a bit dreadful,” she pursued. Still, there was a greater interest. “Do you like Mr. Van?”

This time her interlocutor indeed hung fire. “How can I tell? He dazzles me.”

“But don’t you like that?” Then before he could really say: “You’re afraid he may be false?”

At this he fairly laughed. “You go to the point!” She just coloured to have amused him so, but he quickly went on: “I think one has a little natural nervousness at being carried off one’s feet. I’m afraid I’ve always liked too much to see where I’m going.”

“And you don’t with him?” She spoke with her curious hard interest. “I understand. But I think I like to be dazzled.”

“Oh you’ve got time — you can come round again; you’ve a margin for accidents, for disappointments and recoveries: you can take one thing with another. But I’ve only my last little scrap.”

“And you want to make no mistakes — I see.”

“Well, I’m too easily upset.”

“Ah so am I,” said Nanda. “I assure you that in spite of what you say I want to make no mistakes either. I’ve seen a great many — though you mightn’t think it,” she persisted; “I really know what they may be. Do you like ME?” she brought forth. But even on this she spared him too; a look appeared to have been enough for her. “How can you say, of course, already? — if you can’t say for Mr. Van. I mean as you’ve seen him so much. When he asked me just now if I liked YOU I told him it was too soon. But it isn’t now; you see it goes fast. I DO like you.” She gave him no time to acknowledge this tribute, but — as if it were a matter of course — tried him quickly with something else. “Can you say if you like mother?”

He could meet it pretty well now. “There are immense reasons why I should.”

“Yes — I know about them, as I mentioned: mother has told me.” But what she had to put to him kept up his surprise. “Have reasons anything to do with it? I don’t believe you like her!” she exclaimed. “SHE doesn’t think so,” she added.

The old man’s face at last, partly bewildered, partly reassured, showed something finer still in the effect she produced. “Into what mysteries you plunge!”

“Oh we do; that’s what every one says of us. We discuss everything and every one — we’re always discussing each other. I think we must be rather celebrated for it, and it’s a kind of trick — isn’t it? — that’s catching. But don’t you think it’s the most interesting sort of talk? Mother says we haven’t any prejudices. YOU have, probably, quantities — and beautiful ones: so perhaps I oughtn’t to tell you. But you’ll find out for yourself.”

“Yes — I’m rather slow; but I generally end by finding out. And I’ve got, thank heaven,” said Mr. Longdon, “quite prejudices enough.”

“Then I hope you’ll tell me some of them,” Nanda replied in a tone evidently marking how much he pleased her.

“Ah you must do as *I* do — you must find out for yourself. Your resemblance to your grandmother is quite prodigious,” he immediately added.

“That’s what I wish you’d tell me about — your recollection of her and your wonderful feeling about her. Mother has told me things, but that I should have something straight from you is exactly what she also wants. My grandmother must have been awfully nice,” the girl rambled on, “and I somehow don’t see myself at all as the same sort of person.”

“Oh I don’t say you’re in the least the same sort: all I allude to,” Mr. Longdon returned, “is the miracle of the physical heredity. Nothing could be less like her than your manner and your talk.”

Nanda looked at him with all her honesty. “They’re not so good, you must think.”

He hung fire an instant, but was as honest as she. “You’re separated from her by a gulf — and not only of time. Personally, you see, you breathe a different air.”

She thought — she quite took it in. “Of course. And you breathe the same — the same old one, I mean, as my grandmother.”

“The same old one,” Mr. Longdon smiled, “as much as possible. Some day I’ll tell you more of what you’re curious of. I can’t go into it now.”

“Because I’ve upset you so?” Nanda frankly asked.

“That’s one of the reasons.”

“I think I can see another too,” she observed after a moment. “You’re not sure how much I shall understand. But I shall understand,” she went on, “more, perhaps, than you think. In fact,” she said earnestly, “I PROMISE to understand. I’ve some imagination. Had my grandmother?” she asked. Her actual sequences were not rapid, but she had already anticipated him. “I’ve thought of that before, because I put the same question to mother.”

“And what did your mother say?”

“‘Imagination — dear mamma? Not a grain!’”

The old man showed a faint flush. “Your mother then has a supply that makes up for it.”

The girl fixed him on this with a deeper attention. “You don’t like her having said that.”

His colour came stronger, though a slightly strained smile did what it could to diffuse coolness. “I don’t care a single scrap, my dear, in respect to the friend I’m speaking of, for any judgement but my own.”

“Not even for her daughter’s?”

“Not even for her daughter’s.” Mr. Longdon had not spoken loud, but he rang as clear as a bell.

Nanda, for admiration of it, broke almost for the first time into the semblance of a smile. “You feel as if my grandmother were quite YOUR property!”

“Oh quite.”

“I say — that’s splendid!”

“I’m glad you like it,” he answered kindly.

The very kindness pulled her up. “Pardon my speaking so, but I’m sure you know what I mean. You mustn’t think,” she eagerly continued, “that mother won’t also want to hear you.”

“On the subject of Lady Julia?” He gently, but very effectively, shook his head. “Your mother shall never hear me.”

Nanda appeared to wonder at it an instant, and it made her completely grave again. “It will be all for ME?”

“Whatever there may be of it, my dear.”

“Oh I shall get it all out of you,” she returned without hesitation. Her mixture of free familiarity and of the vividness of evocation of something, whatever it was, sharply opposed — the little worry of this contradiction, not altogether unpleasant, continued to fill his consciousness more discernibly than anything else. It was really reflected in his quick brown eyes that she alternately drew him on and warned him off, but also that what they were beginning more and more to make out was an emotion of her own trembling there beneath her tension. His glimpse of it widened — his glimpse of it fairly triumphed when suddenly, after this last declaration, she threw off with quite the same accent but quite another effect: “I’m glad to be like any one the thought of whom makes you so good! You ARE good,” she continued; “I see already how I shall feel it.” She stared at him with tears, the sight of which brought his own straight back; so that thus for a moment they sat there together.

“My dear child!” he at last simply murmured. But he laid his hand on her now, and her own immediately met it.

“You’ll get used to me,” she said with the same gentleness that the response of her touch had tried to express; “and I shall be so careful with you that — well, you’ll see!” She broke short off with a quaver and the next instant she turned — there was some one at the door. Vanderbank, still not quite at his ease, had come back to smile upon them. Detaching herself from Mr. Longdon she got straight up to meet him. “You were right, Mr. Van. It’s beautiful, beautiful, beautiful!”

BOOK FOURTH. MR. CASHMORE

Harold Brookenham, whom Mr. Cashmore, ushered in and announced, had found in the act of helping himself to a cup of tea at the table apparently just prepared — Harold Brookenham arrived at the point with a dash so direct as to leave the visitor an option between but two suppositions: that of a desperate plunge, to have his shame soon over, or that of the acquired habit of such appeals, which had taught him the easiest way. There was no great sharpness in the face of Mr. Cashmore, who was somehow massive without majesty; yet he mightn't have been proof against the suspicion that his young friend's embarrassment was an easy precaution, a conscious corrective to the danger of audacity. It wouldn't have been impossible to divine that if Harold shut his eyes and jumped it was mainly for the appearance of doing so. Experience was to be taken as showing that one might get a five-pound note as one got a light for a cigarette; but one had to check the friendly impulse to ask for it in the same way. Mr. Cashmore had in fact looked surprised, yet not on the whole so surprised as the young man seemed to have expected of him. There was almost a quiet grace in the combination of promptitude and diffidence with which Harold took over the responsibility of all proprietorship of the crisp morsel of paper that he slipped with slow firmness into the pocket of his waistcoat, rubbing it gently in its passage against the delicately buff-coloured duck of which that garment was composed. "So quite too awfully kind of you that I really don't know what to say" — there was a marked recall, in the manner of this speech, of the sweetness of his mother's droop and the tenderness of her wail. It was as if he had been moved for the moment to moralise, but the eyes he raised to his benefactor had the oddest effect of marking that personage himself as a theme for the moralist.

Mr. Cashmore, who would have been very red-haired if he had not been very bald, showed a single eye-glass and a long upper lip; he was large and jaunty, with little petulant movements and intense ejaculations that were not in the line of his type. "You may say anything you like if you don't say you'll repay it. That's always nonsense — I hate it."

Harold remained sad, but showed himself really superior. "Then I won't say it." Pensively, a minute, he appeared to figure the words, in their absurdity, on the lips of some young man not, like himself, tactful. "I know just what you mean."

"But I think, you know, that you ought to tell your father," Mr. Cashmore said.

"Tell him I've borrowed of you?"

Mr. Cashmore good-humouredly demurred. "It would serve me right — it's so wretched my having listened to you. Tell him, certainly," he went on after an instant. "But what I mean is that if you're in such straits you should speak to him like a man."

Harold smiled at the innocence of a friend who could suppose him not to have exhausted that resource. "I'm ALWAYS speaking to him like a man, and that's just what puts him so awfully out. He denies to my face that I AM one. One would suppose, to hear him, not only that I'm a small objectionable child, but that I'm scarcely even human. He doesn't conceive me as with human wants."

"Oh," Mr. Cashmore laughed, "you've all — you youngsters — as many wants, I know, as an advertisement page of the Times."

Harold showed an admiration. "That's awfully good. If you think you ought to speak of it," he continued, "do it rather to mamma." He noted the hour. "I'll go, if you'll excuse me, to give you the chance."

The visitor referred to his own watch. "It's your mother herself who gives the chances — the chances YOU take."

Harold looked kind and simple. "She HAS come in, I know. She'll be with you in a moment."

He was halfway to the door, but Mr. Cashmore, though so easy, had not done with him. "I suppose you mean that if it's only your mother who's told, you may depend on her to shield you."

Harold turned this over as if it were a questionable sovereign, but on second thoughts he wonderfully smiled. "Do you think that after you've let me have it you can tell? You could, of course, if you hadn't." He appeared to work it out for Mr. Cashmore's benefit. "But I don't mind," he added, "your telling mamma."

"Don't mind, you mean really, its annoying her so awfully?"

The invitation to repent thrown off in this could only strike the young man as absurd — it was so previous to any enjoyment. Harold liked things in their proper order; but at the same time his evolutions were quick. "I dare say I AM selfish, but what I was thinking was that the terrific wigging, don't you know? — well, I'd take

it from HER. She knows about one's life — about our having to go on, by no fault of our own, as our parents start us. She knows all about wants — no one has more than mamma."

Mr. Cashmore soundlessly glared his amusement. "So she'll say it's all right?"

"Oh no; she'll let me have it hot. But she'll recognise that at such a pass more must be done for a fellow, and that may lead to something — indirectly, don't you see? for she won't TELL my father, she'll only, in her own way, work on him — that will put me on a better footing and for which therefore at bottom I shall have to thank YOU!"

The eye assisted by Mr. Cashmore's glass had with a discernible growth of something like alarm fixed during this address the subject of his beneficence. The thread of their relations somehow lost itself in the subtler twist, and he fell back on mere stature, position and property, things always convenient in the presence of crookedness. "I shall say nothing to your mother, but I think I shall be rather glad you're not a son of mine."

Harold wondered at this new element in their talk. "Do your sons never — ?"

"Borrow money of their mother's visitors?" Mr. Cashmore had taken him up, eager, evidently, quite to satisfy him; but the question was caught on the wing by Mrs. Brookenham herself, who had opened the door as her friend spoke and who quickly advanced with an echo of it.

"Lady Fanny's visitors?" — and, though her eyes rather avoided than met his own, she seemed to cover her ladyship's husband with a vague but practised sympathy. "What on earth are you saying to Harold about them?" Thus it was that at the end of a few minutes Mr. Cashmore, on the sofa face to face with her, found his consciousness quite purged of its actual sense of his weakness and a new turn given to the idea of what, in one's very drawing-room, might go on behind one's back. Harold had quickly vanished — had been tacitly disposed of, and Mrs. Brook's caller had moved even in the short space of time so far in another direction as to have drawn from her the little cold question: "'Presents'? You don't mean money?"

He clearly felt the importance of expressing at least by his silence and his eye-glass what he meant. "Her extravagance is beyond everything, and though there are bills enough, God knows, that do come in to me, I don't see how she pulls through unless there are others that go elsewhere."

Mrs. Brookenham had given him his tea — her own she had placed on a small table near her; and she could now respond freely to the impulse felt, on this, of settling herself to something of real interest. Except to Harold she was incapable of reproach, though there were of course shades in her resignation, and her daughter's report of her to Mr. Longdon as conscious of an absence of prejudice would have been justified for a spectator by the particular feeling that Mr. Cashmore's speech caused her to disclose. What did this feeling wonderfully appear unless strangely irrelevant? "I've no patience when I hear you talk as if you weren't horribly rich."

He looked at her an instant as if guessing she might have derived that impression from Harold. "What has that to do with it? Does a rich man enjoy any more than a poor his wife's making a fool of him?"

Her eyes opened wider: it was one of her very few ways of betraying amusement. There was little indeed to be amused at here except his choice of the particular invidious name. "You know I don't believe a word you say."

Mr. Cashmore drank his tea, then rose to carry the cup somewhere and put it down, declining with a motion any assistance. When he was on the sofa again he resumed their intimate talk. "I like tremendously to be with you, but you mustn't think I've come here to let you say to me such dreadful things as that." He was an odd compound, Mr. Cashmore, and the air of personal good health, the untarnished bloom which sometimes lent a monstrous serenity to his mention of the barely mentionable, was on occasion balanced or matched by his playful application of extravagant terms to matters of much less moment. "You know what I come to you for, Mrs. Brook: I won't come any more if you're going to be horrid and impossible."

"You come to me, I suppose, because — for my deep misfortune, I assure you — I've a kind of vision of things, of the wretched miseries in which you all knot yourselves up, which you yourselves are as little blessed with as if, tumbling about together in your heap, you were a litter of blind kittens."

"Awfully good that — you do lift the burden of my trouble!" He had laughed out in the manner of the man who made notes for platform use of things that might serve; but the next moment he was grave again, as if his observation had reminded him of Harold's praise of his wit. It was in this spirit that he abruptly brought out: "Where, by the way, is your daughter?"

"I haven't the least idea. I do all I can to enter into her life, but you can't get into a railway train while it's

on the rush."

Mr. Cashmore swung back to hilarity. "You give me lots of things. Do you mean she's so 'fast'?" He could keep the ball going.

Mrs. Brookenham obliged him with what she meant. "No; she's a tremendous dear, and we're great friends. But she has her free young life, which, by that law of our time that I'm sure I only want, like all other laws, once I know what they ARE, to accept — she has her precious freshness of feeling which I say to myself that, so far as control is concerned, I ought to respect. I try to get her to sit with me, and she does so a little, because she's kind. But before I know it she leaves me again: she feels what a difference her presence makes in one's liberty of talk."

Mr. Cashmore was struck by this picture. "That's awfully charming of her."

"Isn't it too dear?" The thought of it, for Mrs. Brook, seemed fairly to open out vistas. "The modern daughter!"

"But not the ancient mother!" Mr. Cashmore smiled.

She shook her head with a world of accepted woe. "'Give me back, give me back one hour of my youth'! Oh I haven't a single thrill left to answer a compliment. I sit here now face to face with things as they are. They come in their turn, I assure you — and they find me," Mrs. Brook sighed, "ready. Nanda has stepped on the stage and I give her up the house. Besides," she went on musingly, "it's awfully interesting. It IS the modern daughter — we're really 'doing' her, the child and I; and as the modern has always been my own note — I've gone in, I mean, frankly for my very own Time — who is one, after all, that one should pretend to decline to go where it may lead?" Mr. Cashmore was unprepared with an answer to this question, and his hostess continued in a different tone: "It's sweet her sparing one!"

This, for the visitor, was firmer ground. "Do you mean about talking before her?"

Mrs. Brook's assent was positively tender. "She won't have a difference in my freedom. It's as if the dear thing KNEW, don't you see? what we must keep back. She wants us not to have to think. It's quite maternal!" she mused again. Then as if with the pleasure of presenting it to him afresh: "That's the modern daughter!"

"Well," said Mr. Cashmore, "I can't help wishing she were a trifle less considerate. In that case I might find her with you, and I may tell you frankly that I get more from her than I do from you. She has the great merit for me, in the first place, of not being such an admirer of my wife."

Mrs. Brookenham took this up with interest. "No — you're right; she doesn't, as I do, SEE Lady Fanny, and that's a kind of mercy."

"There you are then, you inconsistent creature," he cried with a laugh: "after all you DO believe me! You recognise how benighted it would be for your daughter not to feel that Fanny's bad."

"You're too tiresome, my dear man," Mrs. Brook returned, "with your ridiculous simplifications. Fanny's NOT 'bad'; she's magnificently good — in the sense of being generous and simple and true, too adorably unaffected and without the least mesquinerie. She's a great calm silver statue."

Mr. Cashmore showed, on this, something of the strength that comes from the practice of public debate. "Then why are you glad your daughter doesn't like her?"

Mrs. Brook smiled as with the sadness of having too much to triumph. "Because I'm not, like Fanny, without mesquinerie. I'm not generous and simple. I'm exaggeratedly anxious about Nanda. I care, in spite of myself, for what people may say. Your wife doesn't — she towers above them. I can be a shade less brave through the chance of my girl's not happening to feel her as the rest of us do."

Mr. Cashmore too heavily followed. "To 'feel' her?"

Mrs. Brook floated over. "There would be in that case perhaps something to hint to her not to shriek on the house-tops. When you say," she continued, "that one admits, as regards Fanny, anything wrong, you pervert dreadfully what one does freely grant — that she's a great glorious pagan. It's a real relief to know such a type — it's like a flash of insight into history. None the less if you ask me why then it isn't all right for young things to 'shriek' as I say, I have my answer perfectly ready." After which, as her visitor seemed not only too reduced to doubt it, but too baffled to distinguish audibly, for his credit, between resignation and admiration, she produced: "Because she's purely instinctive. Her instincts are splendid — but it's terrific."

"That's all I ever maintained it to be!" Mr. Cashmore cried. "It IS terrific."

"Well," his friend answered, "I'm watching her. We're all watching her. It's like some great natural poetic thing — an Alpine sunrise or a big high tide."

"You're amazing!" Mr. Cashmore laughed. "I'm watching her too."

"And I'm also watching YOU!" Mrs. Brook lucidly continued. "What I don't for a moment believe is that her bills are paid by any one. It's MUCH more probable," she sagaciously observed, "that they're not paid at all."

"Oh well, if she can get on that way — !"

"There can't be a place in London," Mrs. Brook pursued, "where they're not delighted to dress such a woman. She shows things, don't you see? as some fine tourist region shows the placards in the fields and the posters on the rocks. And what proof can you adduce?" she asked.

Mr. Cashmore had grown restless; he picked a stray thread off the knee of his trousers. "Ah when you talk about 'adducing' — !" He appeared to intimate — as with the hint that if she didn't take care she might bore him — that it was the kind of word he used only in the House of Commons.

"When I talk about it you can't meet me," she placidly returned. But she fixed him with her weary penetration. "You try to believe what you CAN'T believe, in order to give yourself excuses. And she does the same — only less, for she recognises less in general the need of them. She's so grand and simple."

Poor Mr. Cashmore stared. "Grander and simpler than I, you mean?"

Mrs. Brookenham thought. "Not simpler — no; but very much grander. She wouldn't, in the case you conceive, recognise really the need of WHAT you conceive."

Mr. Cashmore wondered — it was almost mystic. "I don't understand you."

Mrs. Brook, seeing it all from dim depths, tracked it further and further. "We've talked her over so!"

Mr. Cashmore groaned as if too conscious of it. "Indeed we have!"

"I mean WE" — and it was wonderful how her accent discriminated. "We've talked you too — but of course we talk to every one." She had a pause through which there glimmered a ray from luminous hours, the inner intimacy which, privileged as he was, he couldn't pretend to share; then she broke out almost impatiently: "We're looking after her — leave her to US!"

His envy of this nearer approach to what so touched him than he could himself achieve was in his face, but he tried to throw it off. "I doubt if after all you're good for her."

But Mrs. Brookenham knew. "She's just the sort of person we ARE good for, and the thing for her is to be with us as much as possible — just live with us naturally and easily, listen to our talk, feel our confidence in her, be kept up, don't you know? by the sense of what we expect of her splendid type, and so, little by little, let our influence act. What I meant to say just now is that I do perfectly see her taking what you call presents."

"Well then," Mr. Cashmore enquired, "what do you want more?"

Mrs. Brook hung fire an instant — she seemed on the point of telling him. "I DON'T see her, as I said, recognising the obligation."

"The obligation — ?"

"To give anything back. Anything at all." Mrs. Brook was positive. "The comprehension of petty calculations? Never!"

"I don't say the calculations are petty," Mr. Cashmore objected.

"Well, she's a great creature. If she does fall — !" His hostess lost herself in the view, which was at last all before her. "Be sure we shall all know it."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of!"

"Then don't be afraid till we do. She would fall, as it were, on US, don't you see? and," said Mrs. Brook, with decision this time in her headshake, "that couldn't be. We MUST keep her up — that's your guarantee. It's rather too much," she added with the same increase of briskness, "to have to keep YOU up too. Be very sure that if Carrie really wavers—"

"Carrie?"

His interruption was clearly too vague to be sincere, and it was as such that, going straight on, she treated it. "I shall never again give her three minutes' attention. To answer to you for Fanny without being able—"

"To answer to Fanny for me, do you mean?" He had flushed quickly as if he awaited her there. "It wouldn't suit you, you contend? Well then, I hope it will ease you off," he went on with spirit, "to know that I wholly LOATHE Mrs. Donner."

Mrs. Brook, staring, met the announcement with an absolute change of colour. "And since when, pray?" It was as if a fabric had crumbled. "She was here but the other day, and as full of you, poor thing, as an egg of meat."

Mr. Cashmore could only blush for her. "I don't say she wasn't. My life's a burden from her."

Nothing, for a spectator, could have been so odd as Mrs. Brook's disappointment unless it had been her determination. "Have you done with her already?"

"One has never done with a buzzing insect — !"

"Until one has literally killed it?" Mrs. Brookenham wailed. "I can't take that from you, my dear man: it was yourself who originally distilled the poison that courses through her veins." He jumped up at this as if he couldn't bear it, presenting as he walked across the room, however, a large foolish fugitive back on which her eyes rested as on a proof of her penetration. "If you spoil everything by trying to deceive me, how can I help you?"

He had looked, in his restlessness, at a picture or two, but he finally turned round. "With whom is it you talk us over? With Petherton and his friend Mitchy? With your adored Vanderbank? With your awful Duchess?"

"You know my little circle, and you've not always despised it." She met him on his return with a figure that had visibly flashed out for her. "Don't foul your own nest! Remember that after all we've more or less produced you." She had a smile that attenuated a little her image, for there were things that on a second thought he appeared ready to take from her. She patted the sofa as if to invite him again to be seated, and though he still stood before her it was with a face that seemed to show how her touch went home. "You know I've never quite thought you do us full honour, but it was because SHE took you for one of us that Carrie first —"

At this, to stop her, he dropped straight into the seat. "I assure you there has really been nothing." With a continuation of his fidget he pulled out his watch. "Won't she come in at all?"

"Do you mean Nanda?"

"Talk me over with HER!" he smiled, "if you like. If you don't believe Mrs. Donner is dust and ashes to me," he continued, "you do little justice to your daughter."

"Do you wish to break it to me that you're in love with Nanda?"

He hesitated, but only as if to give weight to his reply. "Awfully. I can't tell you how I like her."

She wondered. "And pray how will THAT help me? Help me, I mean, to help you. Is it what I'm to tell your wife?"

He sat looking away, but he evidently had his idea, which he at last produced. "Why wouldn't it be just the thing? It would exactly prove my purity."

There might have been in her momentary silence a hint of acceptance of it as a practical contribution to their problem, and there were indeed several lights in which it could be considered. Mrs. Brook, on a quick survey, selected the ironic. "I see, I see. I might by the same law arrange somehow that Lady Fanny should find herself in love with Edward. That would 'prove' HER purity. And you could be quite at ease," she laughed— "he wouldn't make any presents!"

Mr. Cashmore regarded her with a candour that was almost a reproach to her mirth. "I like your daughter better than I like you."

But it only amused her more. "Is that perhaps because *I* don't prove your purity?"

What he might have replied remained in the air, for the door opened so exactly at the moment she spoke that he rose again with a start and the butler, coming in, received her enquiry full in the face. This functionary's answer to it, however, had no more than the usual austerity. "Mr. Vanderbank and Mr. Longdon."

These visitors took a minute to appear, and Mrs. Brook, not stirring — still only looking from the sofa calmly up at Mr. Cashmore — used the time, it might have seemed, for correcting any impression of undue levity made by her recent question. "Where did you last meet Nanda?"

He glanced at the door to see if he were heard. "At the Grendons'."

"So you do go there?"

"I went over from Hicks the other day for an hour."

"And Carrie was there?"

"Yes. It was a dreadful horrid bore. But I talked only to your daughter."

She got up — the others were at hand — and offered Mr. Cashmore an expression that might have struck him as strange. "It's serious."

"Serious?" — he had no eyes for the others.

"She didn't tell me."

He gave a sound, controlled by discretion, which sufficed none the less to make Mr. Longdon — beholding him for the first time — receive it with a little of the stiffness of a person greeted with a guffaw. Mr. Cashmore visibly liked this silence of Nanda's about their meeting.

II

Mrs. Brookenham, who had introduced him to the elder of her visitors, had also found in serving these gentlemen with tea, a chance to edge at him with an intensity not to be resisted: “Talk to Mr. Longdon — take him off THERE.” She had indicated the sofa at the opposite end of the room and had set him an example by possessing herself, in the place she already occupied, of her “adored” Vanderbank. This arrangement, however, constituted for her, in her own corner, as soon as she had made it, the ground of an appeal. “Will he hate me any worse for doing that?”

Vanderbank glanced at the others. “Will Cashmore, do you mean?”

“Dear no — I don’t care whom HE hates. But with Mr. Longdon I want to avoid mistakes.”

“Then don’t try quite so hard!” Vanderbank laughed. “Is that your reason for throwing him into Cashmore’s arms?”

“Yes, precisely — so that I shall have these few moments to ask you for directions: you must know him by this time so well. I only want, heaven help me, to be as nice to him as I possibly can.”

“That’s quite the best thing for you and altogether why, this afternoon, I brought him: he might have better luck in finding you — it was he who suggested it — than he has had by himself. I’m in a general way,” Vanderbank added, “watching over him.”

“I see — and he’s watching over you.” Mrs. Brook’s sweet vacancy had already taken in so much. “He wants to judge of what I may be doing to you — he wants to save you from me. He quite detests me.”

Vanderbank, with the interest as well as the amusement, fairly threw himself back. “There’s nobody like you — you’re too magnificent!”

“I AM; and that I can look the truth in the face and not be angry or silly about it is, as you know, the one thing in the world for which I think a bit well of myself.”

“Oh yes, I know — I know; you’re too wonderful!”

Mrs. Brookenham, in a brief pause, completed her covert consciousness. “They’re doing beautifully — he’s taking Cashmore with a seriousness!”

“And with what is Cashmore taking him?”

“With the hope that from one moment to another Nanda may come in.”

“But how on earth does that concern him?”

“Through an extraordinary fancy he has suddenly taken to her.” Mrs. Brook had been swift to master the facts. “He has been meeting her at Tishy’s, and she has talked to him so effectually about his behaviour that she has quite made him cease to care for Carrie. He prefers HER now — and of course she’s much nicer.”

Vanderbank’s attention, it was clear, had now been fully seized. “She’s much nicer. Rather! What you mean is,” he asked the next moment, “that Nanda, this afternoon, has been the object of his call?”

“Yes — really; though he tried to keep it from me. She makes him feel,” she went on, “so innocent and good.”

Her companion for a moment said nothing; but then at last: “And WILL she come in?”

“I haven’t the least idea.”

“Don’t you know where she is?”

“I suppose she’s with Tishy, who has returned to town.”

Vanderbank turned this over. “Is that your system now — to ask no questions?”

“Why SHOULD I ask any — when I want her life to be as much as possible like my own? It’s simply that the hour has struck, as you know. From the moment she IS down the only thing for us is to live as friends. I think it’s so vulgar,” Mrs. Brook sighed, “not to have the same good manners with one’s children as one has with other people. She asks ME nothing.”

“Nothing?” Vanderbank echoed.

“Nothing.”

He paused again; after which, “It’s very disgusting!” he declared. Then while she took it up as he had taken her word of a moment before, “It’s very preposterous,” he continued.

Mrs. Brook appeared at a loss. “Do you mean her helping him?”

“It’s not of Nanda I’m speaking — it’s of him.” Vanderbank spoke with a certain impatience. “His being with her in any sort of direct relation at all. His mixing her up with his other beastly affairs.”

Mrs. Brook looked intelligent and wan about it, but also perfectly good-humoured. “My dear man, he and his affairs ARE such twaddle!”

Vanderbank laughed in spite of himself. “And does that make it any better?”

Mrs. Brook thought, but presently had a light — she almost smiled with it. “For US!” Then more woefully, “Don’t you want Carrie to be saved?” she asked.

“Why should I? Not a jot. Carrie be hanged!”

“But it’s for Fanny,” Mrs. Brook protested. “If Carrie IS rescued it’s a pretext the less for Fanny.” As the young man looked for an instant rather gloomily vague she softly quavered: “I suppose you don’t positively WANT Fanny to bolt?”

“To bolt?”

“Surely I’ve not to remind you at this time of day how Captain Dent-Douglas is always round the corner with the post-chaise, and how tight, on our side, we’re all clutching her.”

“But why not let her go?”

Mrs. Brook, at this, showed real resentment. “‘Go’? Then what would become of us?” She recalled his wandering fancy. “She’s the delight of our life.”

“Oh!” Vanderbank sceptically murmured.

“She’s the ornament of our circle,” his companion insisted. “She will, she won’t — she won’t, she will! It’s the excitement, every day, of plucking the daisy over.” Vanderbank’s attention, as she spoke, had attached itself across the room to Mr. Longdon; it gave her thus an image of the way his imagination had just seemed to her to stray, and she saw a reason in it moreover for her coming up in another place.

“Isn’t he rather rich?” She allowed the question all its effect of abruptness.

Vanderbank looked round at her. “Mr. Longdon? I haven’t the least idea.”

“Not after becoming so intimate? It’s usually, with people, the very first thing I get my impression of.” There came into her face for another glance at their friend no crudity of curiosity, but an expression more tenderly wistful. “He must have some mysterious box under his bed.”

“Down in Suffolk? — a miser’s hoard? Who knows? I dare say,” Vanderbank went on. “He isn’t a miser, but he strikes me as careful.”

Mrs. Brook meanwhile had thought it out. “Then he has something to be careful of; it would take something really handsome to inspire in a man like him that sort of interest. With his small expenses all these years his savings must be immense. And how could he have proposed to mamma unless he had originally had money?”

If Vanderbank a little helplessly wondered he also laughed. “You must remember your mother refused him.”

“Ah but not because there wasn’t enough.”

“No — I imagine the force of the blow for him was just in the other reason.”

“Well, it would have been in that one just as much if that one had been the other.” Mrs. Brook was sagacious, though a trifle obscure, and she pursued the next moment: “Mamma was so sincere. The fortune was nothing to her. That shows it was immense.”

“It couldn’t have been as great as your logic,” Vanderbank smiled; “but of course if it has been growing ever since — !”

“I can see it grow while he sits there,” Mrs. Brook declared. But her logic had in fact its own law, and her next transition was an equal jump. “It was too lovely, the frankness of your admission a minute ago that I affect him uncannily. Ah don’t spoil it by explanations!” she beautifully pleaded: “he’s not the first and he won’t be the last with whom I shall not have been what they call a combination. The only thing that matters is that I mustn’t, if possible, make the case worse. So you must guide me. What IS one to do?”

Vanderbank, now amused again, looked at her kindly. “Be yourself, my dear woman. Obey your fine instincts.”

“How can you be,” she sweetly asked, “so hideously hypocritical? You know as well as you sit there that my fine instincts are the thing in the world you’re most in terror of. ‘Be myself?’” she echoed. “What you’d LIKE to say is: ‘Be somebody else — that’s your only chance.’ Well, I’ll try — I’ll try.”

He laughed again, shaking his head. “Don’t — don’t.”

“You mean it’s too hopeless? There’s no way of effacing the bad impression or of starting a good one?” On this, with a drop of his mirth, he met her eyes, and for an instant, through the superficial levity of their

talk, they might have appeared to sound each other. It lasted till Mrs. Brook went on: “I should really like not to lose him.”

Vanderbank seemed to understand and at last said: “I think you won’t lose him.”

“Do you mean you’ll help me, Van, you WILL?” Her voice had at moments the most touching tones of any in England, and humble, helpless, affectionate, she spoke with a familiarity of friendship. “It’s for the sense of the link with mamma,” she explained. “He’s simply full of her.”

“Oh I know. He’s prodigious.”

“He has told you more — he comes back to it?” Mrs. Brook eagerly asked.

“Well,” the young man replied a trifle evasively, “we’ve had a great deal of talk, and he’s the jolliest old boy possible, and in short I like him.”

“I see,” said Mrs. Brook blandly, “and he likes you in return as much as he despises me. That makes it all right — makes me somehow so happy for you. There’s something in him — what is it? — that suggests the oncle d’Amerique, the eccentric benefactor, the fairy godmother. He’s a little of an old woman — but all the better for it.” She hung fire but an instant before she pursued: “What can we make him do for you?”

Vanderbank at this was very blank. “Do for me?”

“How can any one love you,” she asked, “without wanting to show it in some way? You know all the ways, dear Van,” she breathed, “in which I want to show it.”

He might have known them, something suddenly fixed in his face appeared to say, but they were not what was, on this speech of hers, most immediately present to him. “That for instance is the tone not to take with him.”

“There you are!” she sighed with discouragement. “Well, only TELL me.” Then as he said nothing: “I must be more like mamma?”

His expression confessed to his feeling an awkwardness. “You’re perhaps not quite enough like her.”

“Oh I know that if he deplores me as I am now she would have done so quite as much; in fact probably, as seeing it nearer, a good deal more. She’d have despised me even more than he. But if it’s a question,” Mrs. Brook went on, “of not saying what mamma wouldn’t, how can I know, don’t you see, what she WOULD have said?” Mrs. Brook became as wonderful as if she saw in her friend’s face some admiring reflexion of the fine freedom of mind that — in such a connexion quite as much as in any other — she could always show. “Of course I revere mamma just as much as he does, and there was everything in her to revere. But she was none the less in every way a charming woman too, and I don’t know, after all, do I? what even she — in their peculiar relation — may not have said to him.”

Vanderbank’s laugh came back. “Very good — very good. I return to my first idea. Try with him whatever comes into your head. You’re a woman of genius after all, and genius mostly justifies itself. To make you right,” he went on pleasantly and inexorably, “might perhaps be to make you wrong. Since you HAVE so great a charm trust it not at all or all in all. That, I dare say, is all you can do. Therefore — yes — be yourself.”

These remarks were followed on either side by the repetition of a somewhat intenser mutual gaze, though indeed the speaker’s eyes had more the air of meeting his friend’s than of seeking them. “I can’t be YOU certainly, Van,” Mrs. Brook sadly brought forth.

“I know what you mean by that,” he rejoined in a moment. “You mean I’m hypocritical.”

“Hypocritical?”

“I’m diplomatic and calculating — I don’t show him how bad I am; whereas with you he knows the worst.”

Of this observation Mrs. Brook, whose eyes attached themselves again to Mr. Longdon, took at first no further notice than might have been indicated by the way it set her musing.

“‘Calculating’?” — she at last took him up. “On what is there to calculate?”

“Why,” said Vanderbank, “if, as you just hinted, he’s a blessing in disguise — ! I perfectly admit,” he resumed, “that I’m capable of sacrifices to keep on good terms with him.”

“You’re not afraid he’ll bore you?”

“Oh yes — distinctly.”

“But he’ll be worth it? Then,” Mrs. Brook said as he appeared to assent, “he’ll be worth a great deal.” She continued to watch Mr. Longdon, who, without his glasses, stared straight at the floor while Mr. Cashmore talked to him. She pursued, however, dispassionately enough: “He must be of a narrowness — !”

“Oh beautiful!”

She was silent again. “I shall broaden him. YOU won’t.”

“Heaven forbid!” Vanderbank heartily concurred. “But none the less, as I’ve said, I’ll help you.”

Her attention was still fixed. “It will be him you’ll help. If you’re to make sacrifices to keep on good terms with him the first sacrifice will be of me.” Then on his leaving this remark so long unanswered that she had finally looked at him again: “I’m perfectly prepared for it.”

It was as if, jocosely enough, he had had time to make up his mind how to meet her. “What will you have — when he loved my mother?”

Nothing could have been droller than the gloom of her surprise. “Yours too?”

“I didn’t tell you the other day — out of delicacy.”

Mrs. Brookenham darkly thought. “HE didn’t tell me either.”

“The same consideration deterred him. But if I didn’t speak of it,” Vanderbank continued, “when I arranged with you, after meeting him here at dinner, that you should come to tea with him at my rooms — if I didn’t mention it then it wasn’t because I hadn’t learnt it early.”

Mrs. Brook more deeply sounded this affair, but she spoke with the exaggerated mildness that was the form mostly taken by her gaiety. “It was because of course it makes him out such a wretch! What becomes in that case of his loyalty?”

“To YOUR mother’s memory? Oh it’s all right — he has it quite straight. She came later. Mine, after my father’s death, had refused him. But you see he might have been my stepfather.”

Mrs. Brookenham took it in, but she had suddenly a brighter light. “He might have been my OWN father! Besides,” she went on, “if his line is to love the mothers why on earth doesn’t he love ME? I’m in all conscience enough of one.”

“Ah but isn’t there in your case the fact of a daughter?” Vanderbank asked with a slight embarrassment.

Mrs. Brookenham stared. “What good does that do me?”

“Why, didn’t she tell you?”

“Nanda? She told me he doesn’t like her any better than he likes me.”

Vanderbank in his turn showed surprise. “That’s really what she said?”

“She had on her return from your rooms a most unusual fit of frankness, for she generally tells me nothing.”

“Well,” said Vanderbank, “how did she put it?”

Mrs. Brook reflected — recovered it. “‘I like him awfully, but I am not in the least HIS idea.’”

“His idea of what?”

“That’s just what I asked her. Of the proper grandchild for mamma.”

Vanderbank hesitated. “Well, she isn’t.” Then after another pause: “But she’ll do.”

His companion gave him a deep look. “You’ll make her?”

He got up, and on seeing him move Mr. Longdon also rose, so that, facing each other across the room, they exchanged a friendly signal or two. “I’ll make her.”

III

Their hostess's account of Mr. Cashmore's motive for his staying on was so far justified as that Vanderbank, while Mr. Longdon came over to Mrs. Brook, appeared without difficulty further to engage him. The lady in question meanwhile had drawn her old friend down, and her present method of approach would have interested an observer aware of the unhappy conviction she had just privately expressed. Some trace indeed of the glimpse of it enjoyed by Mr. Cashmere's present interlocutor might have been detected in the restlessness that Vanderbank's desire to keep the other pair uninterrupted was still not able to banish from his attitude. Not, however, that Mrs. Brook took the smallest account of it as she quickly broke out: "How can we thank you enough, my dear man, for your extraordinary kindness?" The reference was vivid, yet Mr. Longdon looked so blank about it that she had immediately to explain. "I mean to dear Van, who has told us of your giving him the great happiness — unless he's too dreadfully mistaken — of letting him really know you. He's such a tremendous friend of ours that nothing so delightful can befall him without its affecting us in the same way." She had proceeded with confidence, but suddenly she pulled up. "Don't tell me he IS mistaken — I shouldn't be able to bear it." She challenged the pale old man with a loveliness that was for the moment absolutely juvenile. "Aren't you letting him — really?"

Mr. Longdon's smile was queer. "I can't prevent him. I'm not a great house — to give orders to go over me. The kindness is Mr. Vanderbank's own, and I've taken up, I'm afraid, a great deal of his precious time."

"You have indeed." Mrs. Brook was undiscouraged. "He has been talking with me just now of nothing else. You may say," she went on, "that it's I who have kept him at it. So I have, for his pleasure's a joy to us. If you can't prevent what he feels, you know, you can't prevent either what WE feel."

Mr. Longdon's face reflected for a minute something he could scarcely have supposed her acute enough to make out, the struggle between his real mistrust of her, founded on the unconscious violence offered by her nature to his every memory of her mother, and his sense on the other hand of the high propriety of his liking her; to which latter force his interest in Vanderbank was a contribution, inasmuch as he was obliged to recognise on the part of the pair an alliance it would have been difficult to explain at Beccles. "Perhaps I don't quite see the value of what your husband and you and I are in a position to do for him."

"Do you mean because he's himself so clever?"

"Well," said Mr. Longdon, "I dare say that's at the bottom of my feeling so proud to be taken up by him. I think of the young men of MY time and see that he takes in more. But that's what you all do," he rather helplessly sighed. "You're very, very wonderful!"

She met him with an almost extravagant eagerness that the meeting should be just where he wished. "I don't take in everything, but I take in all I can. That's a great affair in London to-day, and I often feel as if I were a circus-woman, in pink tights and no particular skirts, riding half a dozen horses at once. We're all in the troupe now, I suppose," she smiled, "and we must travel with the show. But when you say we're different," she added, "think, after all, of mamma."

Mr. Longdon stared. "It's from her you ARE different."

"Ah but she had an awfully fine mind. We're not cleverer than she."

His conscious honest eyes looked away an instant. "It's perhaps enough for the present that you're cleverer than I! I was very glad the other day," he continued, "to make the acquaintance of your daughter. I hoped I should find her with you."

If Mrs. Brook cast about it was but for a few seconds. "If she had known you were coming she would certainly have been here. She wanted so to please you." Then as her visitor took no further notice of this speech than to ask if Nanda were out of the house she had to admit it as an aggravation of failure; but she pursued in the next breath: "Of course you won't care, but she raves about you."

He appeared indeed at first not to care. "Isn't she eighteen?" — it was oddly abrupt.

"I have to think. Wouldn't it be nearer twenty?" Mrs. Brook audaciously returned. She tried again. "She told me all about your interview. I stayed away on purpose — I had my idea."

"And what WAS your idea?"

"I thought she'd remind you more of mamma if I wasn't there. But she's a little person who sees. Perhaps you didn't think it, but she knew."

"And what did she know?" asked Mr. Longdon, who was unable, however, to keep from his tone a certain

coldness which really deprived the question of its proper curiosity.

Mrs. Brook just showed the chill of it, but she had always her courage. “Why that you don’t like her.” She had the courage of carrying off as well as of backing out. “She too has her little place with the circus — it’s the way we earn our living.”

Mr. Longdon said nothing for a moment and when he at last spoke it was almost with an air of contradiction. “She’s your mother to the life.”

His hostess, for three seconds, looked at him hard. “Ah but with such differences! You’ll lose it,” she added with a headshake of pity.

He had his eyes only on Vanderbank. “Well, my losses are my own affair.” Then his face came back. “Did she tell you I didn’t like her?”

The indulgence in Mrs. Brook’s view of his simplicity was marked. “You thought you succeeded so in hiding it? No matter — she bears up. I think she really feels a great deal as I do — that it’s no matter how many of us you hate if you’ll only go on feeling as you do about mamma. Show us THAT — that’s what we want.”

Nothing could have expressed more the balm of reassurance, but the mild drops had fallen short of the spot to which they were directed. “‘Show’ you?”

Oh how he had sounded the word! “I see — you DON’T show. That’s just what Nanda saw you thought! But you can’t keep us from knowing it — can’t keep it in fact, I think, from affecting your own behaviour. You’d be much worse to us if it wasn’t for the still warm ashes of your old passion.” It was an immense pity for Vanderbank’s amusement that he was at this moment too far off to fit to the expression of his old friend’s face so much of the cause of it as had sprung from the deeply informed tone of Mrs. Brook’s allusion. To what degree the speaker herself made the connexion will never be known to history, nor whether as she went on she thought she bettered her case or she simply lost her head. “The great thing for us is that we can never be for you quite like other ordinary people.”

“And what’s the great thing for ME?”

“Oh for you, there’s nothing, I’m afraid, but small things — so small that they can scarcely be worth the trouble of your making them out. Our being so happy that you’ve come back to us — if only just for a glimpse and to leave us again, in no matter what horror, for ever; our positive delight in your being exactly so different; the pleasure we have in talking about you, and shall still have — or indeed all the more — even if we’ve seen you only to lose you: whatever all this represents for ourselves it’s for none of us to pretend to say how much or how little YOU may pick out of it. And yet,” Mrs. Brook wandered on, “however much we may disappoint you some little spark of the past can’t help being in us — for the past is the one thing beyond all spoiling: there it is, don’t you think? — to speak for itself and, if need be, only OF itself.” She pulled up, but she appeared to have destroyed all power of speech in him, so that while she waited she had time for a fresh inspiration. It might perhaps frankly have been mentioned as on the whole her finest. “Don’t you think it possible that if you once get the point of view of realising that I KNOW — ?”

She held the note so long that he at last supplied a sound. “That you know what?”

“Why that compared with her I’m a poor creeping thing. I mean” — she hastened to forestall any protest of mere decency that would spoil her idea— “that of course I ache in every limb with the certainty of my dreadful difference. It isn’t as if I DIDN’T know it, don’t you see? There it is as a matter of course: I’ve helplessly but finally and completely accepted it. Won’t THAT help you?” she so ingeniously pleaded. “It isn’t as if I tormented you with any recall of her whatever. I can quite see how awful it would be for you if, with the effect I produce on you, I did have her lovely eyes or her distinguished nose or the shape of her forehead or the colour of her hair. Strange as it is in a daughter I’m disconnected altogether, and don’t you think I MAY be a little saved for you by becoming thus simply out of the question? Of course,” she continued, “your real trial is poor Nanda — she’s likewise so fearfully out of it and yet she’s so fearfully in it. And she,” said Mrs. Brook for a climax— “SHE doesn’t know!”

A strange faint flush, while she talked, had come into Mr. Longdon’s face, and, whatever effect, as she put it, she produced on him, it was clearly not that of causing his attention to wander. She held him at least for weal or woe; his bright eyes grew brighter and opened into a stare that finally seemed to offer him as submerged in mere wonder. At last, however, he rose to the surface, and he appeared to have lighted at the bottom of the sea on the pearl of the particular wisdom he needed. “I dare say there may be something in what you so extraordinarily suggest.”

She jumped at it as if in pleasant pain. “In just letting me go — ?”

But at this he dropped. “I shall never let you go.”

It renewed her fear. “Not just for what I AM?”

He rose from his place beside her, but looking away from her and with his colour marked. “I shall never let you go,” he repeated.

“Oh you angel!” She sprang up more quickly and the others were by this time on their feet. “I’ve done it, I’ve done it!” she joyously cried to Vanderbank; “he likes me, or at least he can bear me — I’ve found him the way; and now I don’t care even if he SAYS I haven’t.” Then she turned again to her old friend. “We can manage about Nanda — you needn’t ever see her. She’s ‘down’ now, but she can go up again. We can arrange it at any rate — c’est la moindre des choses.”

“Upon my honour I protest,” Mr. Cashmore exclaimed, “against anything of the sort! I defy you to ‘arrange’ that young lady in any such manner without also arranging ME. I’m one of her greatest admirers,” he gaily announced to Mr. Longdon.

Vanderbank said nothing, and Mr. Longdon seemed to show he would have preferred to do the same: that visitor’s eyes might have represented an appeal to him somehow to intervene, to show the due acquaintance, springing from practice and wanting in himself, with the art of conversation developed to the point at which it could thus sustain a lady in the upper air. Vanderbank’s silence might, without his mere kind pacific look, have seemed almost inhuman. Poor Mr. Longdon had finally to do his own simple best. “Will you bring your daughter to see me?” he asked of Mrs. Brookenham.

“Oh, oh — that’s an idea: will you bring her to see ME?” Mr. Cashmore again broke out.

Mrs. Brook had only fixed Mr. Longdon with the air of unutterable things. “You angel, you angel!” — they found expression but in that.

“I don’t need to ask you to bring her, do I?” Vanderbank now said to his hostess. “I hope you don’t mind my bragging all over the place of the great honour she did me the other day in appearing quite by herself.”

“Quite by herself? I say, Mrs. Brook!” Mr. Cashmore flourished on.

It was only now that she noticed him; which she did indeed but by answering Vanderbank. “She didn’t go for YOU I’m afraid — though of course she might: she went because you had promised her Mr. Longdon. But I should have no more feeling about her going to you — and should expect her to have no more — than about her taking a pound of tea, as she sometimes does, to her old nurse, or her going to read to the old women at the workhouse. May you never have less to brag of!”

“I wish she’d bring ME a pound of tea!” Mr. Cashmore resumed. “Or ain’t I enough of an old woman for her to come and read to me at home?”

“Does she habitually visit the workhouse?” Mr. Longdon enquired of Mrs. Brook.

This lady kept him in a moment’s suspense, which another contemplation might moreover have detected that Vanderbank in some degree shared. “Every Friday at three.”

Vanderbank, with a sudden turn, moved straight to one of the windows, and Mr. Cashmore had a happy remembrance. “Why, this is Friday — she must have gone to-day. But does she stay so late?”

“She was to go afterwards to little Aggie: I’m trying so, in spite of difficulties,” Mrs. Brook explained, “to keep them on together.” She addressed herself with a new thought to Mr. Longdon. “You must know little Aggie — the niece of the Duchess: I forget if you’ve met the Duchess, but you must know HER too — there are so many things on which I’m sure she’ll feel with you. Little Aggie’s the one,” she continued; “you’ll delight in her; SHE ought to have been mamma’s grandchild.”

“Dearest lady, how can you pretend or for a moment compare her — ?” Mr. Cashmore broke in. “She says nothing to me at all.”

“She says nothing to any one,” Mrs. Brook serenely replied; “that’s just her type and her charm — just above all her education.” Then she appealed to Vanderbank. “Won’t Mr. Longdon be struck with little Aggie and won’t he find it interesting to talk about all that sort of thing with the Duchess?”

Vanderbank came back laughing, but Mr. Longdon anticipated his reply. “What sort of thing do you mean?”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Brook, “the whole question, don’t you know? of bringing girls forward or not. The question of — well, what do you call it? — their exposure. It’s THE question, it appears — the question — of the future; it’s awfully interesting and the Duchess at any rate is great on it. Nanda of course is exposed,” Mrs. Brook pursued— “fearfully.”

"And what on earth is she exposed to?" Mr. Cashmore gaily demanded.

"She's exposed to YOU, it would seem, my dear fellow!" Vanderbank spoke with a certain discernible impatience not so much of the fact he mentioned as of the turn of their talk.

It might have been in almost compassionate deprecation of this weak note that Mrs. Brookenham looked at him. Her own reply to Mr. Cashmere's question, however, was uttered at Mr. Longdon. "She's exposed — it's much worse — to ME. But Aggie isn't exposed to anything — never has been and never is to be; and we're watching to see if the Duchess can carry it through."

"Why not," asked Mr. Cashmore, "if there's nothing she CAN be exposed to but the Duchess herself?"

He had appealed to his companions impartially, but Mr. Longdon, whose attention was now all for his hostess, appeared unconscious. "If you're all watching is it your idea that I should watch WITH you?"

The enquiry, on his lips, was a waft of cold air, the sense of which clearly led Mrs. Brook to put her invitation on the right ground. "Not of course on the chance of anything's happening to the dear child — to whom nothing obviously CAN happen but that her aunt will marry her off in the shortest possible time and in the best possible conditions. No, the interest is much more in the way the Duchess herself steers."

"Ah, she's in a boat," Mr. Cashmore fully concurred, "that will take a good bit of that."

It is not for Mr. Longdon's historian to overlook that if he was, not unnaturally, mystified he was yet also visibly interested. "What boat is she in?"

He had addressed his curiosity, with politeness, to Mr. Cashmore, but they were all arrested by the wonderful way in which Mrs. Brook managed to smile at once very dimly, very darkly, and yet make it take them all in. "I think YOU must tell him, Van."

"Heaven forbid!" — and Van again retreated.

"I'LL tell him like a shot — if you really give me leave," said Mr. Cashmore, for whom any scruple referred itself manifestly not to the subject of the information but to the presence of a lady.

"I DON'T give you leave and I beg you'll hold your tongue," Mrs. Brookenham returned. "You handle such matters with a minuteness — ! In short," she broke off to Mr. Longdon, "he would tell you a good deal more than you'll care to know. She IS in a boat — but she's an experienced mariner. Basta, as she would say. Do you know Mitchy?" Mrs. Brook suddenly asked.

"Oh yes, he knows Mitchy" — Vanderbank had approached again.

"Then make HIM tell him" — she put it before the young man as a charming turn for them all. "Mitchy CAN be refined when he tries."

"Oh dear — when Mitchy 'tries'!" Vanderbank laughed. "I think I should rather, for the job, offer him to Mr. Longdon abandoned to his native wild impulse."

"I LIKE Mr. Mitchett," the old man said, endeavouring to look his hostess straight in the eye and speaking as if somewhat to defy her to convict him, even from the point of view of Beccles, of a mistake.

Mrs. Brookenham took it with a wonderful bright emotion. "My dear friend, vous me rendez la vie! If you can stand Mitchy you can stand any of us!"

"Upon my honour I should think so!" Mr. Cashmore was eager to remark. "What on earth do you mean," he demanded of Mrs. Brook, "by saying that I'm more 'minute' than he?"

She turned her beauty an instant on this critic. "I don't say you're more minute — I say he's more brilliant. Besides, as I've told you before, you're not one of us." With which, as a check to further discussion, she went straight on to Mr. Longdon: "The point about Aggie's conservative education is the wonderful sincerity with which the Duchess feels that one's girl may so perfectly and consistently be hedged in without one's really ever (for it comes to that) depriving one's own self—"

"Well, of what?" Mr. Longdon boldly demanded while his hostess appeared thoughtfully to falter.

She addressed herself mutely to Vanderbank, in whom the movement produced a laugh. "I defy you," he exclaimed, "to say!"

"Well, you don't defy ME!" Mr. Cashmore cried as Mrs. Brook failed to take up the challenge. "If you know Mitchy," he went on to Mr. Longdon, "you must know Petherton."

The elder man remained vague and not imperceptibly cold. "Petherton?"

"My brother-in-law — whom, God knows why, Mitchy runs."

"Runs?" Mr. Longdon again echoed.

Mrs. Brook appealed afresh to Vanderbank. "I think we ought to spare him. I may not remind you of mamma," she continued to their companion, "but I hope you don't mind my saying how much you remind

me. Explanations, after all, spoil things, and if you CAN make anything of us and will sometimes come back you'll find everything in its native freshness. You'll see, you'll feel for yourself."

Mr. Longdon stood before her and raised to Vanderbank, when she had ceased, the eyes he had attached to the carpet while she talked. "And must I go now?" Explanations, she had said, spoiled things, but he might have been a stranger at an Eastern court — comically helpless without his interpreter.

"If Mrs. Brook desires to 'spare' you," Vanderbank kindly replied, "the best way to make sure of it would perhaps indeed be to remove you. But hadn't we a hope of Nanda?"

"It might be of use for us to wait for her?" — it was still to his young friend that Mr. Longdon put it.

"Ah when she's once on the loose — !" Mrs. Brookenham sighed.

"Unless la voila," she said as a hand was heard at the door-latch. It was only, however, a footman who entered with a little tray that, on his approaching his mistress, offered to sight the brown envelope of a telegram. She immediately took leave to open this missive, after the quick perusal of which she had another vision of them all. "It IS she — the modern daughter. 'Tishy keeps me dinner and opera; clothes all right; return uncertain, but if before morning have latch-key.' She won't come home till morning!" said Mrs. Brook.

"But think of the comfort of the latch-key!" Vanderbank laughed. "You might go to the opera," he said to Mr. Longdon.

"Hanged if *I* don't!" Mr. Cashmore exclaimed.

Mr. Longdon appeared to have caught from Nanda's message an obscure agitation; he met his young friend's suggestion at all events with a visible intensity. "Will you go with me?"

Vanderbank had just debated, recalling engagements; which gave Mrs. Brook time to intervene. "Can't you live without him?" she asked of her elder friend.

Vanderbank had looked at her an instant. "I think I can get there late," he then replied to Mr. Longdon.

"I think *I* can get there early," Mr. Cashmore declared. "Mrs. Grendon must have a box; in fact I know which, and THEY don't," he jocosely continued to his hostess.

Mrs. Brook meanwhile had given Mr. Longdon her hand. "Well, in any case the child SHALL soon come to you. And oh alone," she insisted: "you needn't make phrases — I know too well what I'm about."

"One hopes really you do," pursued the unquenched Mr. Cashmore.

"If that's what one gets by having known your mother — !"

"It wouldn't have helped YOU" Mrs. Brook retorted. "And won't you have to say it's ALL you were to get?" she pityingly murmured to her other visitor.

He turned to Vanderbank with a strange gasp, and that comforter said "Come!"

BOOK FIFTH. THE DUCHESS

The lower windows of the great white house, which stood high and square, opened to a wide flagged terrace, the parapet of which, an old balustrade of stone, was broken in the middle of its course by a flight of stone steps that descended to a wonderful garden. The terrace had the afternoon shade and fairly hung over the prospect that dropped away and circled it — the prospect, beyond the series of gardens, of scattered splendid trees and green glades, an horizon mainly of woods. Nanda Brookenham, one day at the end of July, coming out to find the place unoccupied as yet by other visitors, stood there a while with an air of happy possession. She moved from end to end of the terrace, pausing, gazing about her, taking in with a face that showed the pleasure of a brief independence the combination of delightful things — of old rooms with old decorations that gleamed and gloomed through the high windows, of old gardens that squared themselves in the wide angles of old walls, of wood-walks rustling in the afternoon breeze and stretching away to further reaches of solitude and summer. The scene had an expectant stillness that she was too charmed to desire to break; she watched it, listened to it, followed with her eyes the white butterflies among the flowers below her, then gave a start as the cry of a peacock came to her from an unseen alley. It set her after a minute into less difficult motion; she passed slowly down the steps, wandering further, looking back at the big bright house but pleased again to see no one else appear. If the sun was still high enough she had a pink parasol. She went through the gardens one by one, skirting the high walls that were so like "collections" and thinking how, later on, the nectarines and plums would flush there. She exchanged a friendly greeting with a man at work, passed through an open door and, turning this way and that, finally found herself in the park, at some distance from the house. It was a point she had had to take another rise to reach, a place marked by an old green bench for a larger sweep of the view, which, in the distance where the woods stopped, showed in the most English way in the world the colour-spot of an old red village and the tower of an old grey church. She had sunk down upon the bench almost with a sense of adventure, yet not too fluttered to wonder if it wouldn't have been happy to bring a book; the charm of which precisely would have been in feeling everything about her too beautiful to let her read.

The sense of adventure grew in her, presently becoming aware of a stir in the thicket below, followed by the coming into sight, on a path that, mounting, passed near her seat, of a wanderer whom, had his particular, his exceptional identity not quickly appeared, it might have disappointed her a trifle to have to recognise as a friend. He saw her immediately, stopped, laughed, waved his hat, then bounded up the slope and, brushing his forehead with his handkerchief, confessing as to a red face, was rejoicingly there before her. Her own ejaculation on first seeing him— "Why, Mr. Van!" — had had an ambiguous sharpness that was rather for herself than for her visitor. She made room for him on the bench, where in a moment he was cooling off and they were both explaining. The great thing was that he had walked from the station to stretch his legs, coming far round, for the lovely hour and the pleasure of it, by a way he had learnt on some previous occasion of being at Mertle.

"You've already stayed here then?" Nanda, who had arrived but half an hour before, spoke as if she had lost the chance to give him a new impression.

"I've stayed here — yes, but not with Mitchy; with some people or other — who the deuce can they have been? — who had the place for a few months a year or two ago."

"Don't you even remember?"

Vanderbank wondered and laughed. "It will come to me. But it's a charming sign of London relations, isn't it? — that one CAN come down to people this way and be awfully well 'done for' and all that, and then go away and lose the whole thing, quite forget to whom one has been beholden. It's a queer life."

Nanda seemed for an instant to wish to say that one might deny the queerness, but she said something else instead. "I suppose a man like you doesn't quite feel that he IS beholden. It's awfully good of him — it's doing a great deal for anybody — that he should come down at all; so that it would add immensely to his burden if anybody had to be remembered for it."

"I don't know what you mean by a man 'like me,'" Vanderbank returned. "I'm not any particular kind of a man." She had been looking at him, but she looked away on this, and he continued good-humoured and explanatory. "If you mean that I go about such a lot, how do you know it but by the fact that you're everywhere now yourself? — so that, whatever I am, in short, you're just as bad."

"You admit then that you ARE everywhere. I may be just as bad," the girl went on, "but the point is that I'm not nearly so good. Girls are such natural hacks — they can't be anything else."

"And pray what are fellows who are in the beastly grind of fearfully busy offices? There isn't an old cabhorse in London that's kept at it, I assure you, as I am. Besides," the young man added, "if I'm out every night and off somewhere like this for Sunday, can't you understand, my dear child, the fundamental reason of it?"

Nanda, with her eyes on him again, studied an instant this mystery. "Am I to infer with delight that it's the sweet hope of meeting ME? It isn't," she continued in a moment, "as if there were any necessity for your saying that. What's the use?" But all impatiently she stopped short.

He was eminently gay even if his companion was not. "Because we're such jolly old friends that we really needn't so much as speak at all? Yes, thank goodness — thank goodness." He had been looking round him, taking in the scene; he had dropped his hat on the ground and, completely at his ease, though still more wishing to show it, had crossed his legs and closely folded his arms. "What a tremendously jolly place! If I can't for the life of me recall who they were — the other people — I've the comfort of being sure their minds are an equal blank. Do they even remember the place they had? 'We had some fellows down at — where was it, the big white house last November? — and there was one of them, out of the What-do-you-call-it? — YOU know — who might have been a decent enough chap if he hadn't presumed so on his gifts.'" Vanderbank paused a minute, but his companion said nothing, and he pursued. "It does show, doesn't it? — the fact that we do meet this way — the tremendous change that has taken place in your life in the last three months. I mean, if I'm everywhere as you said just now, your being just the same."

"Yes — you see what you've done."

"How, what I'VE done?"

"You plunge into the woods for change, for solitude," the girl said, "and the first thing you do is to find me waylaying you in the depths of the forest. But I really couldn't — if you'll reflect upon it — know you were coming this way."

He sat there with his position unchanged but with a constant little shake in the foot that hung down, as if everything — and what she now put before him not least — was much too pleasant to be reflected on. "May I smoke a cigarette?"

Nanda waited a little; her friend had taken out his silver case, which was of ample form, and as he extracted a cigarette she put forth her hand. "May *I*?" She turned the case over with admiration.

Vanderbank demurred. "Do you smoke with Mr. Longdon?"

"Immensely. But what has that to do with it?"

"Everything, everything." He spoke with a faint ring of impatience. "I want you to do with me exactly as you do with him."

"Ah that's soon said!" the girl replied in a peculiar tone. "How do you mean, to 'do'?"

"Well then to BE. What shall I say?" Vanderbank pleasantly wondered while his foot kept up its motion. "To feel."

She continued to handle the cigarette-case, without, however, having profited by its contents. "I don't think that as regards Mr. Longdon and me you know quite so much as you suppose."

Vanderbank laughed and smoked. "I take for granted he tells me everything."

"Ah but you scarcely take for granted *I* do!" She rubbed her cheek an instant with the polished silver and again the next moment turned over the case. "This is the kind of one I should like."

Her companion glanced down at it. "Why it holds twenty."

"Well, I want one that holds twenty."

Vanderbank only threw out his smoke. "I want so to give you something," he said at last, "that, in my relief at lighting on an object that will do, I will, if you don't look out, give you either that or a pipe."

"Do you mean this particular one?"

"I've had it for years — but even that one if you like it."

She kept it — continued to finger it. "And by whom was it given you?"

At this he turned to her smiling. "You think I've forgotten that too?"

"Certainly you must have forgotten, to be willing to give it away again."

"But how do you know it was a present?"

"Such things always are — people don't buy them for themselves."

She had now relinquished the object, laying it upon the bench, and Vanderbank took it up. “Its origin’s lost in the night of time — it has no history except that I’ve used it. But I assure you that I do want to give you something. I’ve never given you anything.”

She was silent a little. “The exhibition you’re making,” she seriously sighed at last, “of your inconstancy and superficiality! All the relics of you that I’ve treasured and that I supposed at the time to have meant something!”

“The ‘relics’? Have you a lock of my hair?” Then as her meaning came to him: “Oh little Christmas things? Have you really kept them?”

“Laid away in a drawer of their own — done up in pink paper.”

“I know what you’re coming to,” Vanderbank said. “You’ve given ME things, and you’re trying to convict me of having lost the sweet sense of them. But you can’t do it. Where my heart’s concerned I’m a walking reliquary. Pink paper? *I* use gold paper — and the finest of all, the gold paper of the mind.” He gave a flip with a fingernail to his cigarette and looked at its quickened fire; after which he pursued very familiarly, but with a kindness that of itself qualified the mere humour of the thing: “Don’t talk, my dear child, as if you didn’t really know me for the best friend you have in the world.” As soon as he had spoken he pulled out his watch, so that if his words had led to something of a pause this movement offered a pretext for breaking it. Nanda asked the hour and, on his replying “Five-fifteen,” remarked that there would now be tea on the terrace with every one gathered at it. “Then shall we go and join them?” her companion demanded.

He had made, however, no other motion, and when after hesitating she said “Yes, with pleasure” it was also without a change of position. “I like this,” she inconsequently added.

“So do I awfully. Tea on the terrace,” Vanderbank went on, “isn’t ‘in’ it. But who’s here?”

“Oh every one. All your set.”

“Mine? Have I still a set — with the universal vagabondism you accuse me of?”

“Well then Mitchy’s — whoever they are.”

“And nobody of yours?”

“Oh yes,” Nanda said, “all mine. He must at least have arrived by this time. My set’s Mr. Longdon,” she explained. “He’s all of it now.”

“Then where in the world am I?”

“Oh you’re an extra. There are always extras.”

“A complete set and one over?” Vanderbank laughed. “Where then’s Tishy?”

Charming and grave, the girl thought a moment. “She’s in Paris with her mother — on their way to Aix-les-Bains.” Then with impatience she continued: “Do you know that’s a great deal to say — what you said just now? I mean about your being the best friend I have.”

“Of course I do, and that’s exactly why I said it. You see I’m not in the least delicate or graceful or shy about it — I just come out with it and defy you to contradict me. Who, if I’m not the best, is a better one?”

“Well,” Nanda replied, “I feel since I’ve known Mr. Longdon that I’ve almost the sort of friend who makes every one else not count.”

“Then at the end of three months he has arrived at a value for you that I haven’t reached in all these years?”

“Yes,” she returned— “the value of my not being afraid of him.”

Vanderbank, on the bench, shifted his position, turning more to her and throwing an arm over the back. “And you’re afraid of ME?”

“Horribly — hideously.”

“Then our long, our happy relations — ?”

“They’re just what makes my terror,” she broke in, “particularly abject. Happy relations don’t matter. I always think of you with fear.”

His elbow rested on the back and his hand supported his head. “How awfully curious — if it be true!”

She had been looking away to the sweet English distance, but at this she made a movement. “Oh Mr. Van, I’m ‘true’!”

As Mr. Van himself couldn’t have expressed at any subsequent time to any interested friend the particular effect upon him of the tone of these words his chronicler takes advantage of the fact not to pretend to a greater intelligence — to limit himself on the contrary to the simple statement that they produced in Mr. Van’s cheek a flush just discernible. “Fear of what?”

"I don't know. Fear is fear."

"Yes, yes — I see." He took out another cigarette and occupied a moment in lighting it. "Well, kindness is kindness too — that's all one can say."

He had smoked again a while before she turned to him. "Have I wounded you by saying that?"

A certain effect of his flush was still in his smile. "It seems to me I should like you to wound me. I did what I wanted a moment ago," he continued with some precipitation: "I brought you out handsomely on the subject of Mr. Longdon. That was my idea — just to draw you."

"Well," said Nanda, looking away again, "he has come into my life."

"He couldn't have come into a place where it gives me more pleasure to see him."

"But he didn't like, the other day when I used it to him, that expression," the girl returned. "He called it 'mannered modern slang' and came back again to the extraordinary difference between my speech and my grandmother's."

"Of course," the young man understandingly assented. "But I rather like your speech. Hasn't he by this time, with you," he pursued, "crossed the gulf? He has with me."

"Ah with you there was no gulf. He liked you from the first."

Vanderbank wondered. "You mean I managed him so well?"

"I don't know how you managed him, but liking me has been for him a painful gradual process. I think he does now," Nanda declared. "He accepts me at last as different — he's trying with me on that basis. He has ended by understanding that when he talks to me of Granny I can't even imagine her."

Vanderbank puffed away. "I can."

"That's what Mitchy says too. But you've both probably got her wrong."

"I don't know," said Vanderbank— "I've gone into it a good deal. But it's too late. We can't be Greeks if we would."

Even for this Nanda had no laugh, though she had a quick attention. "Do you call Granny a Greek?"

Her companion slowly rose. "Yes — to finish her off handsomely and have done with her." He looked again at his watch. "Shall we go? I want to see if my man and my things have turned up."

She kept her seat; there was something to revert to. "My fear of you isn't superficial. I mean it isn't immediate — not of you just as you stand," she explained. "It's of some dreadfully possible future you."

"Well," said the young man, smiling down at her, "don't forget that if there's to be such a monster there'll also be a future you, proportionately developed, to deal with him."

She had closed her parasol in the shade and her eyes attached themselves to the small hole she had dug in the ground with its point. "We shall both have moved, you mean?"

"It's charming to feel we shall probably have moved together."

"Ah if moving's changing," she returned, "there won't be much for me in that. I shall never change — I shall be always just the same. The same old mannered modern slangy hack," she continued quite gravely. "Mr. Longdon has made me feel that."

Vanderbank laughed aloud, and it was especially at her seriousness. "Well, upon my soul!"

"Yes," she pursued, "what I am I must remain. I haven't what's called a principle of growth." Making marks in the earth with her umbrella she appeared to cipher it out. "I'm about as good as I can be — and about as bad. If Mr. Longdon can't make me different nobody can."

Vanderbank could only speak in the tone of high amusement. "And he has given up the hope?"

"Yes — though not ME altogether. He has given up the hope he originally had."

"He gives up quickly — in three months!"

"Oh these three months," she answered, "have been a long time: the fullest, the most important, for what has happened in them, of my life." She still poked at the ground; then she added: "And all thanks to YOU."

"To me?" — Vanderbank couldn't fancy!

"Why, for what we were speaking of just now — my being to-day so in everything and squeezing up and down no matter whose staircase. Isn't it one crowded hour of glorious life?" she asked. "What preceded it was an age, no doubt — but an age without a name."

Vanderbank watched her a little in silence, then spoke quite beside the question. "It's astonishing how at moments you remind me of your mother!"

At this she got up. "Ah there it is! It's what I shall never shake off. That, I imagine, is what Mr. Longdon feels."

Both on their feet now, as if ready for the others, they yet — and even a trifle awkwardly — lingered. It might in fact have appeared to a spectator that some climax had come, on the young man's part, to some state of irresolution about the utterance of something. What were the words so repeatedly on his lips, yet so repeatedly not sounded? It would have struck our observer that they were probably not those his lips even now actually formed. "Doesn't he perhaps talk to you too much about yourself?"

Nanda gave him a dim smile, and he might indeed then have exclaimed on a certain resemblance, a resemblance of expression that had nothing to do with form. It wouldn't have been diminished for him moreover by her successful suppression of every sign that she felt his question a little of a snub. The recall he had previously mentioned could, however, as she answered him, only have been brushed away by a supervening sense of his roughness. "It probably isn't so much that as my own way of going on." She spoke with a mildness that could scarce have been so full without being an effort. "Between his patience and my egotism anything's possible. It isn't his talking — it's his listening." She gave up the point, at any rate, as if from softness to her actual companion. "Wasn't it you who spoke to mamma about my sitting with her? That's what I mean by my debt to you. It's through you that I'm always there — through you and perhaps a little through Mitchy."

"Oh through Mitchy — it MUST have been — more than through me." Vanderbank spoke with the manner of humouring her about a trifle. "Mitchy, delightful man, felt on the subject of your eternal exile, I think, still more strongly."

They quitted their place together and at the end of a few steps became aware of the approach of one of the others, a figure but a few yards off, arriving from the quarter from which Nanda had come. "Ah Mr. Longdon!" — she spoke with eagerness now.

Vanderbank instantly waved his hat. "Dear old boy!"

"Between you all, at any rate," she said more gaily, "you've brought me down."

Vanderbank made no answer till they met their friend, when, by way of greeting, he simply echoed her words. "Between us all, you'll be glad to know, we've brought her down."

Mr. Longdon looked from one of them to the other. "Where have you been together?"

Nanda was the first to respond. "Only talking — on a bench."

"Well, *I* want to talk on a bench!" Their friend showed a spirit.

"With me, of course?" — Vanderbank met it with encouragement.

The girl said nothing, but Mr. Longdon sought her eyes. "No — with Nanda. You must mingle in the crowd."

"Ah," the their companion laughed, "you two are the crowd!"

"Well — have your tea first."

Vanderbank on this, giving it up with the air of amused accommodation that was never — certainly for these two — at fault in him, offered to Mr. Longdon before departing the handshake of greeting he had omitted; a demonstration really the warmer for the tone of the joke that went with it. "Intrigant!"

II

Nanda praised to the satellite so fantastically described the charming spot she had quitted, with the effect that they presently took fresh possession of it, finding the beauty of the view deepened as the afternoon grew old and the shadows long. They were of a comfortable agreement on these matters, by which moreover they were but little delayed, one of the pair at least being too conscious, for the hour, of still other phenomena than the natural and peaceful process that filled the air. "Well, you must tell me about these things," Mr. Longdon sociably said: he had joined his young friend with a budget of impressions rapidly gathered at the house; as to which his appeal to her for a light or two may be taken as the measure of the confidence now ruling their relations. He had come to feel at last, he mentioned, that he could allow for most differences; yet in such a situation as the present bewilderment could only come back. There were no differences in the world — so it had all ended for him — but those that marked at every turn the manners he had for three months been observing in good society. The general wide deviation of this body occupied his mind to the exclusion of almost everything else, and he had finally been brought to believe that even in his slow-paced prime he must have hung behind his contemporaries. He had not supposed at the moment — in the fifties and the sixties — that he passed for old-fashioned, but life couldn't have left him so far in the rear had the start between them originally been fair. This was the way he had more than once put the matter to the girl; which gives a sufficient hint, it is hoped, of the range of some of their talk. It had always wound up indeed, their talk, with some assumption of the growth of his actual understanding; but it was just these pauses in the fray that seemed to lead from time to time to a sharper clash. It was apt to be when he felt as if he had exhausted surprises that he really received his greatest shocks. There were no such queer-tasting draughts as some of those yielded by the bucket that had repeatedly, as he imagined, touched the bottom of the well. "Now this sudden invasion of somebody's — heaven knows whose — house, and our dropping down on it like a swarm of locusts: I dare say it isn't civil to criticise it when one's going too, so almost culpably, with the stream; but what are people made of that they consent, just for money, to the violation of their homes?"

Nanda wondered; she cultivated the sense of his making her intensely reflect, "But haven't people in England always let their places?"

"If we're a nation of shopkeepers, you mean, it can't date, on the scale on which we show it, only from last week? No doubt, no doubt, and the more one thinks of it the more one seems to see that society — for we're IN society, aren't we, and that's our horizon? — can never have been anything but increasingly vulgar. The point is that in the twilight of time — and I belong, you see, to the twilight — it had made out much less how vulgar it COULD be. It did its best very probably, but there were too many superstitions it had to get rid of. It has been throwing them overboard one by one, so that now the ship sails uncommonly light. That's the way" — and with his eyes on the golden distance he ingeniously followed it out— "I come to feel so the lurching and pitching. If I weren't a pretty fair sailor — well, as it is, my dear," he interrupted himself with a laugh, "I show you often enough what grabs I make for support." He gave a faint gasp, half amusement, half anguish, then abruptly relieved himself by a question. "To whom in point of fact does the place belong?"

"I'm awfully ashamed, but I'm afraid I don't know. That just came up here," the girl went on, "for Mr. Van."

Mr. Longdon seemed to think an instant. "Oh it came up, did it? And Mr. Van couldn't tell?"

"He has quite forgotten — though he has been here before. Of course it may have been with other people," she added in extenuation. "I mean it mayn't have been theirs then any more than it's Mitchy's."

"I see. They too had just bundled in."

Nanda completed the simple history. "To-day it's Mitchy who bundles, and I believe that really he bundled only yesterday. He turned in his people and here we are."

"Here we are, here we are!" her friend more gravely echoed. "Well, it's splendid!"

As if at a note in his voice her eyes, while his own still strayed away, just fixed him. "Don't you think it's really rather exciting? Everything's ready, the feast all spread, and with nothing to blunt our curiosity but the general knowledge that there will be people and things — with nothing but that we comfortably take our places." He answered nothing, though her picture apparently reached him. "There ARE people, there ARE things, and all in a plenty. Had every one, when you came away, turned up?" she asked as he was still silent.

"I dare say. There were some ladies and gentlemen on the terrace whom I didn't know. But I looked only

for you and came this way on an indication of your mother's."

"And did she ask that if you should find me with Mr. Van you'd make him come to her?"

Mr. Longdon replied to this with some delay and without movement. "How could she have supposed he was here?"

"Since he had not yet been to the house? Oh it has always been a wonder to me, the things that mamma supposes! I see she asked you," Nanda insisted.

At this her old friend turned to her. "But it wasn't because of that I got rid of him."

She had a pause. "No — you don't mind everything mamma says."

"I don't mind 'everything' anybody says: not even, my dear, when the person's you."

Again she waited an instant. "Not even when it's Mr. Van?"

Mr. Longdon candidly considered. "Oh I take him up on all sorts of things."

"That shows then the importance they have for you. Is HE like his grandmother?" the girl pursued. Then as her companion looked vague: "Wasn't it his grandmother too you knew?"

He had an extraordinary smile. "His mother."

She exclaimed, colouring, on her mistake, and he added: "I'm not so bad as that. But you're none of you like them."

"Wasn't she pretty?" Nanda asked.

"Very handsome. But it makes no difference. She herself to-day wouldn't know him."

She gave a small gasp. "His own mother wouldn't — ?"

His headshake just failed of sharpness. "No, nor he her. There's a link missing." Then as if after all she might take him too seriously, "Of course it's I," he more gently moralised, "who have lost the link in my sleep. I've slept half the century — I'm Rip Van Winkle." He went back after a moment to her question. "He's not at any rate like his mother."

She turned it over. "Perhaps you wouldn't think so much of her now."

"Perhaps not. At all events my snatching you from Mr. Vanderbank was my own idea."

"I wasn't thinking," Nanda said, "of your snatching me. I was thinking of your snatching yourself."

"I might have sent YOU to the house? Well," Mr. Longdon replied, "I find I take more and more the economical view of my pleasures. I run them less and less together. I get all I can out of each."

"So now you're getting all you can out of ME?"

"All I can, my dear — all I can." He watched a little the flushed distance, then mildly broke out: "It IS, as you said just now, exciting! But it makes me" — and he became abrupt again— "want you, as I've already told you, to come to MY place. Not, however, that we may be still more mad together."

The girl shared from the bench his contemplation. "Do you call THIS madness?"

Well, he rather stuck to it. "You spoke of it yourself as excitement. You'll make of course one of your fine distinctions, but I take it in my rough way as a whirl. We're going round and round." In a minute he had folded his arms with the same closeness Vanderbank had used — in a minute he too was nervously shaking his foot. "Steady, steady; if we sit close we shall see it through. But come down to Suffolk for sanity."

"You do mean then that I may come alone?"

"I won't receive you, I assure you, on any other terms. I want to show you," he continued, "what life CAN give. Not of course," he subjoined, "of this sort of thing."

"No — you've told me. Of peace."

"Of peace," said Mr. Longdon. "Oh you don't know — you haven't the least idea. That's just why I want to show you."

Nanda looked as if already she saw it in the distance. "But will it be peace if I'm there? I mean for YOU," she added.

"It isn't a question of 'me.' Everybody's omelet is made of somebody's eggs. Besides, I think that when we're alone together — !"

He had dropped for so long that she wondered. "Well, when we are — ?"

"Why, it will be all right," he simply concluded. "Temples of peace, the ancients used to call them. We'll set up one, and I shall be at least doorkeeper. You'll come down whenever you like."

She gave herself to him in her silence more than she could have done in words. "Have you arranged it with mamma?" she said, however, at last.

"I've arranged everything."

"SHE won't want to come?"

Her friend's laugh turned him to her. "Don't be nervous. There are things as to which your mother trusts me."

"But others as to which not."

Their eyes met for some time on this, and it ended in his saying: "Well, you must help me." Nanda, but without shrinking, looked away again, and Mr. Longdon, as if to consecrate their understanding by the air of ease, passed to another subject. "Mr. Mitchett's the most princely host."

"Isn't he too kind for anything? Do you know what he pretends?" Nanda went on. "He says in the most extraordinary way that he does it all for ME."

"Takes this great place and fills it with servants and company — ?"

"Yes, just so that I may come down for a Sunday or two. Of course he has only taken it for three or four weeks, but even for that time it's a handsome compliment. He doesn't care what he does. It's his way of amusing himself. He amuses himself at our expense," the girl continued.

"Well, I hope that makes up, my dear, for the rate at which we're doing so at his!"

"His amusement," said Nanda, "is to see us believe what he says."

Mr. Longdon thought a moment. "Really, my child, you're most acute."

"Oh I haven't watched life for nothing! Mitchy doesn't care," she repeated.

Her companion seemed divided between a desire to draw and a certain fear to encourage her. "Doesn't care for what?"

She considered an instant, all coherently, and it might have added to Mr. Longdon's impression of her depth. "Well, for himself. I mean for his money. For anything any one may think. For Lord Petherton, for instance, really at all. Lord Petherton thinks he has helped him — thinks, that is, that Mitchy thinks he has. But Mitchy's more amused at HIM than at anybody else. He takes every one in."

"Every one but you?"

"Oh I like him."

"My poor child, you're of a profundity!" Mr. Longdon murmured.

He spoke almost uneasily, but she was not too much alarmed to continue lucid. "And he likes me, and I know just how much — and just how little. He's the most generous man in the world. It pleases him to feel that he's indifferent and splendid — there are so many things it makes up to him for." The old man listened with attention, and his young friend conscious of it, proceeded as on ground of which she knew every inch. "He's the son, as you know, of a great bootmaker— 'to all the Courts of Europe' — who left him a large fortune, which had been made, I believe, in the most extraordinary way, by building-speculations as well."

"Oh yes, I know. It's astonishing!" her companion sighed.

"That he should be of such extraction?"

"Well, everything. That you should be talking as you are — that you should have 'watched life,' as you say, to such purpose. That we should any of us be here — most of all that Mr. Mitchett himself should. That your grandmother's daughter should have brought HER daughter—"

"To stay with a person" — Nanda took it up as, apparently out of delicacy, he fairly failed— "whose father used to take the measure, down on his knees on a little mat, as mamma says, of my grandfather's remarkably large foot? Yes, we none of us mind. Do you think we should?" Nanda asked.

Mr. Longdon turned it over. "I'll answer you by a question. Would you marry him?"

"Never." Then as if to show there was no weakness in her mildness, "Never, never, never," she repeated.

"And yet I dare say you know — ?" But Mr. Longdon once more faltered; his scruple came uppermost. "You don't mind my speaking of it?"

"Of his thinking he wants to marry me? Not a bit. I positively enjoy telling you there's nothing in it."

"Not even for HIM?"

Nanda considered. "Not more than is made up to him by his having found out through talks and things — which mightn't otherwise have occurred — that I do like him. I wouldn't have come down here if I hadn't liked him."

"Not for any other reason?" — Mr. Longdon put it gravely.

"Not for YOUR being here, do you mean?"

He delayed. "Me and other persons."

She showed somehow that she wouldn't flinch. "You weren't asked till after he had made sure I'd come.

We've become, you and I," she smiled, "one of the couples who are invited together."

These were couples, his speculative eye seemed to show, he didn't even yet know about, and if he mentally took them up a moment it was all promptly to drop them. "I don't think you state it quite strongly enough, you know."

"That Mitchy IS hard hit? He states it so strongly himself that it will surely do for both of us. I'm a part of what I just spoke of — his indifference and magnificence. It's as if he could only afford to do what's not vulgar. He might perfectly marry a duke's daughter, but that WOULD be vulgar — would be the absolute necessity and ideal of nine out of ten of the sons of shoemakers made ambitious by riches. Mitchy says 'No; I take my own line; I go in for a beggar-maid.' And it's only because I'm a beggar-maid that he wants me."

"But there are plenty of other beggar-maids," Mr. Longdon objected.

"Oh I admit I'm the one he least dislikes. But if I had any money," Nanda went on, "or if I were really good-looking — for that to-day, the real thing, will do as well as being a duke's daughter — he wouldn't come near me. And I think that ought to settle it. Besides, he must marry Aggie. She's a beggar-maid too — as well as an angel. So there's nothing against it."

Mr. Longdon stared, but even in his surprise seemed to take from the swiftness with which she made him move over the ground a certain agreeable glow. "Does 'Aggie' like him?"

"She likes every one. As I say, she's an angel — but a real, real, real one. The kindest man in the world's therefore the proper husband for her. If Mitchy wants to do something thoroughly nice," she declared with the same high competence, "he'll take her out of her situation, which is awful."

Mr. Longdon looked graver. "In what way awful?"

"Why, don't you know?" His eye was now cold enough to give her, in her chill, a flurried sense that she might displease him least by a graceful lightness. "The Duchess and Lord Petherton are like you and me."

"Is it a conundrum?" He was serious indeed.

"They're one of the couples who are invited together." But his face reflected so little success for her levity that it was in another tone she presently added: "Mitchy really oughtn't." Her friend, in silence, fixed his eyes on the ground; an attitude in which there was something to make her strike rather wild. "But of course, kind as he is, he can scarcely be called particular. He has his ideas — he thinks nothing matters. He says we've all come to a pass that's the end of everything."

Mr. Longdon remained mute a while, and when he at last, raised his eyes it was without meeting Nanda's and with some dryness of manner. "The end of everything? One might easily receive that impression."

He again became mute, and there was a pause between them of some length, accepted by Nanda with an anxious stillness that it might have touched a spectator to observe. She sat there as if waiting for some further sign, only wanting not to displease her friend, yet unable to pretend to play any part and with something in her really that she couldn't take back now, something involved in her original assumption that there was to be a kind of intelligence in their relation. "I dare say," she said at last, "that I make allusions you don't like. But I keep forgetting."

He waited a moment longer, then turned to her with a look rendered a trifle strange by the way it happened to reach over his glasses. It was even austerer than before. "Keep forgetting what?"

She gave after an instant a faint feeble smile which seemed to speak of helplessness and which, when at rare moments it played in her face, was expressive from her positive lack of personal, superficial diffidence. "Well — I don't know." It was as if appearances became at times so complicated that — so far as helping others to understand was concerned — she could only give up.

"I hope you don't think I want you to be with me as you wouldn't be — so to speak — with yourself. I hope you don't think I don't want you to be frank. If you were to try to APPEAR to me anything — !" He ended in simple sadness: that, for instance, would be so little what he should like.

"Anything different, you mean, from what I am? That's just what I've thought from the first. One's just what one IS — isn't one? I don't mean so much," she went on, "in one's character or temper — for they have, haven't they? to be what's called 'properly controlled' — as in one's mind and what one sees and feels and the sort of thing one notices." Nanda paused an instant; then "There you are!" she simply but rather desperately brought out.

Mr. Longdon considered this with visible intensity. "What you suggest is that the things you speak of depend on other people?"

"Well, every one isn't so beautiful as you." She had met him with promptitude, yet no sooner had she

spoken than she appeared again to encounter a difficulty. “But there it is — my just saying even that. Oh how I always know — as I’ve told you before — whenever I’m different! I can’t ask you to tell me the things Granny WOULD have said, because that’s simply arranging to keep myself back from you, and so being nasty and underhand, which you naturally don’t want, nor I either. Nevertheless when I say the things she wouldn’t, then I put before you too much — too much for your liking it — what I know and see and feel. If we’re both partly the result of other people, HER other people were so different.” The girl’s sensitive boldness kept it up, but there was something in her that pleaded for patience. “And yet if she had YOU, so I’ve got you too. It’s the flattery of that, or the sound of it, I know, that must be so unlike her. Of course it’s awfully like mother; yet it isn’t as if you hadn’t already let me see — is it? — that you don’t really think me the same.” Again she stopped a minute, as to find her scarce possible way with him, and again for the time he gave no sign. She struck out once more with her strange cool limpidity. “Granny wasn’t the kind of girl she COULDN’t be — and so neither am I.”

Mr. Longdon had fallen while she talked into something that might have been taken for a conscious temporary submission to her; he had uncrossed his fidgety legs and, thrusting them out with the feet together, sat looking very hard before him, his chin sunk on his breast and his hands, clasped as they met, rapidly twirling their thumbs. So he remained for a time that might have given his young friend the sense of having made herself right for him so far as she had been wrong. He still had all her attention, just as previously she had had his, but, while he now simply gazed and thought, she watched him with a discreet solicitude that would almost have represented him as a near relative whom she supposed unwell. At the end he looked round, and then, obeying some impulse that had gathered in her while they sat mute, she put out to him the tender hand she might have offered to a sick child. They had been talking about frankness, but she showed a frankness in this instance that made him perceptibly colour. To that in turn, however, he responded only the more completely, taking her hand and holding it, keeping it a long minute during which their eyes met and something seemed to clear up that had been too obscure to be dispelled by words. Finally he brought out as if, though it was what he had been thinking of, her gesture had most determined him: “I wish immensely you’d get married!”

His tone betrayed so special a meaning that the words had a sound of suddenness; yet there was always in Nanda’s face that odd preparedness of the young person who has unlearned surprise through the habit, in company, of studiously not compromising her innocence by blinking at things said. “How CAN I?” she asked, but appearing rather to take up the proposal than to put it by.

“Can’t you, CAN’T you?” He spoke pressingly and kept her hand. She shook her head slowly, markedly; on which he continued: “You don’t do justice to Mr. Mitchy.” She said nothing, but her look was there and it made him resume: “Impossible?”

“Impossible.” At this, letting her go, Mr. Longden got up; he pulled out his watch. “We must go back.” She had risen with him and they stood face to face in the faded light while he slipped the watch away. “Well, that doesn’t make me wish it any less.”

“It’s lovely of you to wish it, but I shall be one of the people who don’t. I shall be at the end,” said Nanda, “one of those who haven’t.”

“No, my child,” he returned gravely— “you shall never be anything so sad.”

“Why not — if YOU’VE been?” He looked at her a little, quietly, and then, putting out his hand, passed her own into his arm. “Exactly because I have.”

III

"Would you" the Duchess said to him the next day, "be for five minutes awfully kind to my poor little niece?" The words were spoken in charming entreaty as he issued from the house late on the Sunday afternoon — the second evening of his stay, which the next morning was to bring to an end — and on his meeting the speaker at one of the extremities of the wide cool terrace. There was at this point a subsidiary flight of steps by which she had just mounted from the grounds, one of her purposes being apparently to testify afresh to the anxious supervision of little Aggie she had momentarily suffered herself to be diverted from. This young lady, established in the pleasant shade on a sofa of light construction designed for the open air, offered the image of a patience of which it was a questionable kindness to break the spell. It was that beautiful hour when, toward the close of the happiest days of summer, such places as the great terrace at Mertle present to the fancy a recall of the banquet-hall deserted — deserted by the company lately gathered at tea and now dispersed, according to affinities and combinations promptly felt and perhaps quite as promptly criticised, either in quieter chambers where intimacy might deepen or in gardens and under trees where the stillness knew the click of balls and the good humour of games. There had been chairs, on the terrace, pushed about; there were ungathered teacups on the level top of the parapet; the servants in fact, in the manner of "hands" mustered by a whistle on the deck of a ship, had just arrived to restore things to an order soon again to be broken. There were scattered couples in sight below and an idle group on the lawn, out of the midst of which, in spite of its detachment, somebody was sharp enough sometimes to cry "Out!" The high daylight was still in the sky, but with just the foreknowledge already of the long golden glow in which the many-voiced caw of the rooks would sound at once sociable and sad. There was a great deal all about to be aware of and to look at, but little Aggie had her eyes on a book over which her pretty head was bent with a docility visible even from afar. "I've a friend — down there by the lake — to go back to," the Duchess went on, "and I'm on my way to my room to get a letter that I've promised to show him. I shall immediately bring it down and then in a few minutes be able to relieve you, — I don't leave her alone too much — one doesn't, you know, in a house full of people, a child of that age. Besides" — and Mr. Longdon's interlocutress was even more confiding— "I do want you so very intensely to know her. You, par exemple, you're what I SHOULD like to give her." Mr. Longdon looked the noble lady, in acknowledgement of her appeal, straight in the face, and who can tell whether or no she acutely guessed from his expression that he recognised this particular juncture as written on the page of his doom? — whether she heard him inaudibly say "Ah here it is: I knew it would have to come!" She would at any rate have been astute enough, had this miracle occurred, quite to complete his sense for her own understanding and suffer it to make no difference in the tone in which she still confronted him. "Oh I take the bull by the horns — I know you haven't wanted to know me. If you had you'd have called on me — I've given you plenty of hints and little coughs. Now, you see, I don't cough any more — I just rush at you and grab you. You don't call on me — so I call on YOU. There isn't any indecency moreover that I won't commit for my child."

Mr. Longdon's impenetrability crashed like glass at the elbow-touch of this large handsome practised woman, who walked for him, like some brazen pagan goddess, in a cloud of queer legend. He looked off at her child, who, at a distance and not hearing them, had not moved. "I know she's a great friend of Nanda's."

"Has Nanda told you that?"

"Often — taking such an interest in her."

"I'm glad she thinks so then — though really her interests are so various. But come to my baby. I don't make HER come," she explained as she swept him along, "because I want you just to sit down by her there and keep the place, as one may say — !"

"Well, for whom?" he demanded as she stopped. It was her step that had checked itself as well as her tongue, and again, suddenly, they stood quite consciously and vividly opposed. "Can I trust you?" the Duchess brought out. Again then she took herself up. "But as if I weren't already doing it! It's because I do trust you so utterly that I haven't been able any longer to keep my hands off you. The person I want the place for is none other than Mitchy himself, and half my occupation now is to get it properly kept for him. Lord Petherton's immensely kind, but Lord Petherton can't do everything. I know you really like our host — !"

Mr. Longdon, at this, interrupted her with a certain coldness. "How, may I ask, do you know it?"

But with a brazen goddess to deal with — ! This personage had to fix him but an instant. "Because, you

dear honest man, you're here. You wouldn't be if you hated him, for you don't practically condone — !"

This time he broke in with his eyes on the child. "I feel on the contrary, I assure you, that I condone a great deal."

"Well, don't boast of your cynicism," she laughed, "till you're sure of all it covers. Let the right thing for you be," she went on, "that Nanda herself wants it."

"Nanda herself?" He continued to watch little Aggie, who had never yet turned her head. "I'm afraid I don't understand you."

She swept him on again. "I'll come to you presently and explain. I MUST get my letter for Petherton; after which I'll give up Mitchy, whom I was going to find, and since I've broken the ice — if it isn't too much to say to such a polar bear! — I'll show you le fond de ma pensee. Baby darling," she said to her niece, "keep Mr. Longdon. Show him," she benevolently suggested, "what you've been reading." Then again to her fellow guest, as arrested by this very question: "Caro signore, have YOU a possible book?"

Little Aggie had got straight up and was holding out her volume, which Mr. Longdon, all courtesy for her, glanced at. "Stories from English History. Oh!"

His ejaculation, though vague, was not such as to prevent the girl from venturing gently: "Have you read it?"

Mr. Longdon, receiving her pure little smile, showed he felt he had never so taken her in as at this moment, as well as also that she was a person with whom he should surely get on. "I think I must have."

Little Aggie was still more encouraged, but not to the point of keeping anything back. "It hasn't any author. It's anonymous."

The Duchess borrowed, for another question to Mr. Longdon, not a little of her gravity. "Is it all right?"

"I don't know" — his answer was to Aggie. "There have been some horrid things in English history."

"Oh horrid — HAVEN'T there?" Aggie, whose speech had the prettiest faintest foreignness, sweetly and eagerly quavered.

"Well, darling, Mr. Longdon will recommend to you some nice historical work — for we love history, don't we? — that leaves the horrors out. We like to know," the Duchess explained to the authority she invoked, "the cheerful happy RIGHT things. There are so many, after all, and this is the place to remember them. A tantot."

As she passed into the house by the nearest of the long windows that stood open Mr. Longdon placed himself beside her little charge, whom he treated, for the next ten minutes, with an exquisite courtesy. A person who knew him well would, if present at the scene, have found occasion in it to be freshly aware that he was in his quiet way master of two distinct kinds of urbanity, the kind that added to distance and the kind that diminished it. Such an analyst would furthermore have noted, in respect to the aunt and the niece, of which kind each had the benefit, and might even have gone so far as to detect in him some absolute betrayal of the impression produced on him by his actual companion, some irradiation of his certitude that, from the point of view under which she had been formed, she was a remarkable, a rare success. Since to create a particular little rounded and tinted innocence had been aimed at, the fruit had been grown to the perfection of a peach on a sheltered wall, and this quality of the object resulting from a process might well make him feel himself in contact with something wholly new. Little Aggie differed from any young person he had ever met in that she had been deliberately prepared for consumption and in that furthermore the gentleness of her spirit had immensely helped the preparation. Nanda, beside her, was a Northern savage, and the reason was partly that the elements of that young lady's nature were already, were publicly, were almost indecorously active. They were practically there for good or for ill; experience was still to come and what they might work out to still a mystery; but the sum would get itself done with the figures now on the slate. On little Aggie's slate the figures were yet to be written; which sufficiently accounted for the difference of the two surfaces. Both the girls struck him as lambs with the great shambles of life in their future; but while one, with its neck in a pink ribbon, had no consciousness but that of being fed from the hand with the small sweet biscuit of unobjectionable knowledge, the other struggled with instincts and forebodings, with the suspicion of its doom and the far-borne scent, in the flowery fields, of blood.

"Oh Nanda, she's my best friend after three or four others."

"After so many?" Mr. Longdon laughed. "Don't you think that's rather a back seat, as they say, for one's best?"

"A back seat?" — she wondered with a purity!

“If you don’t understand,” said her companion, “it serves me right, as your aunt didn’t leave me with you to teach you the slang of the day.”

“The ‘slang’?” — she again spotlessly speculated.

“You’ve never even heard the expression? I should think that a great compliment to our time if it weren’t that I fear it may have been only the name that has been kept from you.”

The light of ignorance in the child’s smile was positively golden. “The name?” she again echoed.

She understood too little — he gave it up. “And who are all the other best friends whom poor Nanda comes after?”

“Well, there’s my aunt, and Miss Merriman, and Gelsomina, and Dr. Beltram.”

“And who, please, is Miss Merriman?”

“She’s my governess, don’t you know? — but such a deliciously easy governess.”

“That, I suppose, is because she has such a deliciously easy pupil. And who is Gelsomina?” Mr. Longdon enquired.

“She’s my old nurse — my old maid.”

“I see. Well, one must always be kind to old maids. But who’s Dr. Beltram?”

“Oh the most intimate friend of all. We tell him everything.”

There was for Mr. Longdon in this, with a slight incertitude, an effect of drollery. “Your little troubles?”

“Ah they’re not always so little! And he takes them all away.”

“Always? — on the spot?”

“Sooner or later,” said little Aggie with serenity. “But why not?”

“Why not indeed?” he laughed. “It must be very plain sailing.” Decidedly she was, as Nanda had said, an angel, and there was a wonder in her possession on this footing of one of the most expressive little faces that even her expressive race had ever shown him. Formed to express everything, it scarce expressed as yet even a consciousness. All the elements of play were in it, but they had nothing to play with. It was a rest moreover, after so much that he had lately been through, to be with a person for whom questions were so simple. “But he sounds all the same like the kind of doctor whom, as soon as one hears of him, one wants to send for.”

The young girl had at this a small light of confusion. “Oh I don’t mean he’s a doctor for medicine. He’s a clergyman — and my aunt says he’s a saint. I don’t think you’ve many in England,” little Aggie continued to explain.

“Many saints? I’m afraid not. Your aunt’s very happy to know one. We should call Dr. Beltram in England a priest.”

“Oh but he’s English. And he knows everything we do — and everything we think.”

“‘We’ — your aunt, your governess and your nurse? What a varied wealth of knowledge!”

“Ah Miss Merriman and Gelsomina tell him only what they like.”

“And do you and the Duchess tell him what you DON’T like?”

“Oh often — but we always like HIM — no matter what we tell him. And we know that just the same he always likes us.”

“I see then of course,” said Mr. Longdon, very gravely now, “what a friend he must be. So it’s after all this,” he continued in a moment, “that Nanda comes in?”

His companion had to consider, but suddenly she caught assistance. “This one, I think, comes before.” Lord Petherton, arriving apparently from the garden, had drawn near unobserved by Mr. Longdon and the next moment was within hail. “I see him very often,” she continued— “oftener than Nanda. Oh but THEN Nanda. And then,” little Aggie wound up, “Mr. Mitchy.”

“Oh I’m glad HE comes in,” Mr. Longdon returned, “though rather far down in the list.” Lord Petherton was now before them, there being no one else on the terrace to speak to, and, with the odd look of an excess of physical power that almost blocked the way, he seemed to give them in the flare of his big teeth the benefit of a kind of brutal geniality. It was always to be remembered for him that he could scarce show without surprising you an adjustment to the smaller conveniences; so that when he took up a trifle it was not perforce in every case the sign of an uncanny calculation. When the elephant in the show plays the fiddle it must be mainly with the presumption of consequent apples; which was why, doubtless, this personage had half the time the air of assuring you that, really civilised as his type had now become, no apples were required. Mr. Longdon viewed him with a vague apprehension and as if quite unable to meet the question of what he would have called for such a personage the social responsibility. Did this specimen of his class pull the tradition

down or did he just take it where he found it — in the very different place from that in which, on ceasing so long ago to "go out," Mr. Longdon had left it? Our friend doubtless averted himself from the possibility of a mental dilemma; if the man didn't lower the position was it the position then that let down the man? Somehow he wasn't positively up. More evidence would be needed to decide; yet it was just of more evidence that one remained rather in dread. Lord Petherton was kind to little Aggie, kind to her companion, kind to every one, after Mr. Longdon had explained that she was so good as to be giving him the list of her dear friends. "I'm only a little dismayed," the elder man said, "to find Mr. Mitchett at the bottom."

"Oh but it's an awfully short list, isn't it? If it consists only of me and Mitchy he's not so very low down. We don't allow her very MANY friends; we look out too well for ourselves." He addressed the child as on an easy jocose understanding. "Is the question, Aggie, whether we shall allow you Mr. Longdon? Won't that rather 'do' for us — for Mitchy and me? I say, Duchess," he went on as this lady reappeared, "ARE we going to allow her Mr. Longdon and do we quite realise what we're about? We mount guard awfully, you know" — he carried the joke back to the person he had named. "We sift and we sort, we pick the candidates over, and I should like to hear any one say that in this case at least I don't keep a watch on my taste. Oh we close in!"

The Duchess, the object of her quest in her hand, had come back. "Well then Mr. Longdon will close WITH us — you'll consider henceforth that he's as safe as yourself. Here's the letter I wanted you to read — with which you'll please take a turn, in strict charge of the child, and then restore her to us. If you don't come I shall know you've found Mitchy and shall be at peace. Go, little heart," she continued to the child, "but leave me your book to look over again. I don't know that I'm quite sure!" She sent them off together, but had a grave protest as her friend put out his hand for the volume. "No, Petherton — not for books; for her reading I can't say I do trust you. But for everything else — quite!" she declared to Mr. Longdon with a look of conscientious courage as their companion withdrew. "I do believe," she pursued in the same spirit, "in a certain amount of intelligent confidence. Really nice men are steadied by the sense of your having had it. But I wouldn't," she added gaily, "trust him all round!"

IV

Many things at Mertle were strange for her interlocutor, but nothing perhaps as yet had been so strange as the sight of this arrangement for little Aggie's protection; an arrangement made in the interest of her remaining as a young person of her age and her monde — so her aunt would have put it — should remain. The strangest part of the impression too was that the provision might really have its happy side and his lordship understand definitely better than any one else his noble friend's whole theory of perils and precautions. The child herself, the spectator of the incident was sure enough, understood nothing; but the understandings that surrounded her, filling all the air, made it a heavier compound to breathe than any Mr. Longdon had yet tasted. This heaviness had grown for him through the long sweet summer day, and there was something in his at last finding himself ensconced with the Duchess that made it supremely oppressive. The contact was one that, none the less, he would not have availed himself of a decent pretext to avoid. With so many fine mysteries playing about him there was relief, at the point he had reached, rather than alarm, in the thought of knowing the worst; which it pressed upon him somehow that the Duchess must not only altogether know but must in any relation quite naturally communicate. It fluttered him rather that a person who had an understanding with Lord Petherton should so single him out as to wish for one also with himself; such a person must either have great variety of mind or have a wonderful idea of HIS variety. It was true indeed that Mr. Mitchett must have the most extraordinary understanding, and yet with Mr. Mitchett he now found himself quite pleasantly at his ease. Their host, however, was a person sui generis, whom he had accepted, once for all, the inconsequence of liking in conformity with the need he occasionally felt to put it on record that he was not narrow-minded. Perhaps at bottom he most liked Mitchy because Mitchy most liked Nanda; there hung about him still moreover the faded fragrance of the superstition that hospitality not declined is one of the things that "oblige." It obliged the thoughts, for Mr. Longdon, as well as the manners, and in the especial form in which he was now committed to it would have made him, had he really thought any ill, ask himself what the deuce then he was doing in the man's house. All of which didn't prevent some of Mitchy's queer condonations — if condonations in fact they were — from not wholly, by themselves, soothing his vague unrest, an unrest which never had been so great as at the moment he heard the Duchess abruptly say to him: "Do you know my idea about Nanda? It's my particular desire you should — the reason, really, why I've thus laid violent hands on you. Nanda, my dear man, should marry at the very first moment."

This was more interesting than he had expected, and the effect produced by his interlocutress, as well as doubtless not lost on her, was shown in his suppressed start. "There has been no reason why I should attribute to you any judgement of the matter; but I've had one myself, and I don't see why I shouldn't say frankly that it's very much the one you express. It would be a very good thing."

"A very good thing, but none of my business?" — the Duchess's vivacity was not unamiable.

It was on this circumstance that her companion for an instant perhaps meditated. "It's probably not in my interest to say that. I should give you too easy a retort. It would strike any one as quite as much your business as mine."

"Well, it ought to be somebody's, you know. One would suppose it to be her mother's — her father's; but in this country the parents are even more emancipated than the children. Suppose, really, since it appears to be nobody's affair, that you and I do make it ours. We needn't either of us," she continued, "be concerned for the other's reasons, though I'm perfectly ready, I assure you, to put my cards on the table. You've your feelings — we know they're beautiful. I, on my side, have mine — for which I don't pretend anything but that they're strong. They can dispense with being beautiful when they're so perfectly settled. Besides, I may mention, they're rather nice than otherwise. Edward and I have a cousinage, though for all he does to keep it up — ! If he leaves his children to play in the street I take it seriously enough to make an occasional dash for them before they're run over. And I want for Nanda simply the man she herself wants — it isn't as if I wanted for her a dwarf or a hunchback or a coureur or a drunkard. Vanderbank's a man whom any woman, don't you think? might be — whom more than one woman IS — glad of for herself: beau comme le jour, awfully conceited and awfully patronising, but clever and successful and yet liked, and without, so far as I know, any of the terrific appendages which in this country so often diminish the value of even the pleasantest people. He hasn't five horrible unmarried sisters for his wife to have always on a visit. The way your women don't marry is the ruin here of society, and I've been assured in good quarters — though I don't know so much about that

— the ruin also of conversation and of literature. Isn't it precisely just a little to keep Nanda herself from becoming that kind of appendage — say to poor Harold, say, one of these days, to her younger brother and sister — that friends like you and me feel the importance of bestirring ourselves in time? Of course she's supposedly young, but she's really any age you like: your London world so fearfully batters and bruises them." She had gone fast and far, but it had given Mr. Longdon time to feel himself well afloat. There were so many things in it all to take up that he laid his hand — of which, he was not unconscious, the feebleness exposed him — on the nearest. "Why I'm sure her mother — after twenty years of it — is fresh enough."

"Fresh? You find Mrs. Brook fresh?" The Duchess had a manner that, in its all-knowingness, rather humiliated than encouraged; but he was all the more resolute for being conscious of his own reserves. "It seems to me it's fresh to look about thirty."

"That indeed would be perfect. But she doesn't — she looks about three. She simply looks a baby."

"Oh Duchess, you're really too particular!" he retorted, feeling that, as the trodden worm will turn, anxiety itself may sometimes tend to wit.

She met him in her own way. "I know what I mean. My niece is a person *I* call fresh. It's warranted, as they say in the shops. Besides," she went on, "if a married woman has been knocked about that's only a part of her condition. Elle l'a lien voulu, and if you're married you're married; it's the smoke — or call it the soot! — of the fire. You know, yourself," she roundly pursued, "that Nanda's situation appals you."

"Oh 'appals'!" he restrictively murmured.

It even tried a little his companion's patience. "There you are, you English — you'll never face your own music. It's amazing what you'd rather do with a thing — anything not to shoot at or to make money with — than look at its meaning. If I wished to save the girl as YOU wish it I should know exactly from what. But why differ about reasons," she asked, "when we're at one about the fact? I don't mention the greatest of Vanderbank's merits," she added— "his having so delicious a friend. By whom, let me hasten to assure you," she laughed, "I don't in the least mean Mrs. Brook! She IS delicious if you like, but believe me when I tell you, caro mio — if you need to be told — that for effective action on him you're worth twenty of her."

What was most visible in Mr. Longdon was that, however it came to him, he had rarely before, all at once, had so much given him to think about. Again the only way to manage was to take what came uppermost. "By effective action you mean action on the matter of his proposing for Nanda?"

The Duchess's assent was noble. "You can make him propose — you can make, I mean, a sure thing of it. You can doter the bride." Then as with the impulse to meet benevolently and more than halfway her companion's imperfect apprehension: "You can settle on her something that will make her a parti." His apprehension was perhaps imperfect, but it could still lead somehow to his flushing all over, and this demonstration the Duchess as quickly took into account. "Poor Edward, you know, won't give her a penny."

Decidedly she went fast, but Mr. Longdon in a moment had caught up. "Mr. Vanderbank — your idea is — would require on the part of his wife something of that sort?"

"Pray who wouldn't — in the world we all move in — require it quite as much? Mr. Vanderbank, I'm assured, has no means of his own at all, and if he doesn't believe in impecunious marriages it's not I who shall be shocked at him. For myself I simply despise them. He has nothing but a poor official salary. If it's enough for one it would be little for two, and would be still less for half a dozen. They're just the people to have, that blessed pair, a fine old English family."

Mr. Longdon was now fairly abreast of it. "What it comes to then, the idea you're so good as to put before me, is to bribe him to take her."

The Duchess remained bland, but she fixed him. "You say that as if you were scandalised, but if you try Mr. Van with it I don't think he'll be. And you won't persuade me," she went on finely, "that you haven't yourself thought of it." She kept her eyes on him, and the effect of them, soon enough visible in his face, was such as presently to make her exult at her felicity. "You're of a limpidity, dear man — you've only to be said 'bo!' to and you confess. Consciously or unconsciously — the former, really, I'm inclined to think — you've wanted him for her." She paused an instant to enjoy her triumph, after which she continued: "And you've wanted her for him. I make you out, you'll say — for I see you coming — one of those horrible benevolent busy-bodies who are the worst of the class, but you've only to think a little — if I may go so far — to see that no 'making' at all is required. You've only one link with the Brooks, but that link is golden. How can we, all of us, by this time, not have grasped and admired the beauty of your feeling for Lady Julia? There it is — I make you wince: to speak of it is to profane it. Let us by all means not speak of it then, but let us act on it."

He had at last turned his face from her, and it now took in, from the vantage of his high position, only the loveliness of the place and the hour, which included a glimpse of Lord Petherton and little Aggie, who, down in the garden, slowly strolled in familiar union. Each had a hand in the other's, swinging easily as they went; their talk was evidently of flowers and fruits and birds; it was quite like father and daughter. One could see half a mile off in short that THEY weren't flirting. Our friend's bewilderment came in odd cold gusts: these were unreasoned and capricious; one of them, at all events, during his companion's pause, must have roared in his ears. Was it not therefore through some continuance of the sound that he heard her go on speaking? "Of course you know the poor child's own condition."

It took him a good while to answer. "Do YOU know it?" he asked with his eyes still away.

"If your question's ironical," she laughed, "your irony's perfectly wasted. I should be ashamed of myself if, with my relationship and my interest, I hadn't made sure. Nanda's fairly sick — as sick as a little cat — with her passion." It was with an intensity of silence that he appeared to accept this; he was even so dumb for a minute that the oddity of the image could draw from him no natural sound. The Duchess once more, accordingly, recognised an occasion. "It has doubtless already occurred to you that, since your sentiment for the living is the charming fruit of your sentiment for the dead, there would be a sacrifice to Lady Julia's memory more exquisite than any other."

At this finally Mr. Longdon turned. "The effort — on the lines you speak of — for Nanda's happiness?"

She fairly glowed with hope. "And by the same token such a piece of poetic justice! Quite the loveliest it would be, I think, one had ever heard of."

So, for some time more, they sat confronted. "I don't quite see your difficulty," he said at last. "I do happen to know, I confess, that Nanda herself extremely desires the execution of your project."

His friend's smile betrayed no surprise at this effect of her eloquence. "You're bad at dodging. Nanda's desire is inevitably to stop off for herself every question of any one but Vanderbank. If she wants me to succeed in arranging with Mr. Mitchett can you ask for a plainer sign of her private predicament? But you've signs enough, I see" — she caught herself up: "we may take them all for granted. I've known perfectly from the first that the only difficulty would come from her mother — but also that that would be stiff."

The movement with which Mr. Longdon removed his glasses might have denoted a certain fear to participate in too much of what the Duchess had known. "I've not been ignorant that Mrs. Brookenham favours Mr. Mitchett."

But he was not to be let off with that. "Then you've not been blind, I suppose, to her reason for doing so." He might not have been blind, but his vision, at this, scarce showed sharpness, and it determined in his interlocutress the shortest of short cuts. "She favours Mr. Mitchett because she wants 'old Van' herself."

He was evidently conscious of looking at her hard. "In what sense — herself?"

"Ah you must supply the sense; I can give you only the fact — and it's the fact that concerns us. Voyons" she almost impatiently broke out; "don't try to create unnecessary obscurities by being unnecessarily modest. Besides, I'm not touching your modesty. Supply any sense whatever that may miraculously satisfy your fond English imagination: I don't insist in the least on a bad one. She does want him herself — that's all I say. 'Pourquoi faires' you ask — or rather, being too shy, don't ask, but would like to if you dared or didn't fear I'd be shocked. I CAN'T be shocked, but frankly I can't tell you either. The situation belongs, I think, to an order I don't understand. I understand either one thing or the other — I understand taking a man up or letting him alone. But I don't really get at Mrs. Brook. You must judge at any rate for yourself. Vanderbank could of course tell you if he would — but it wouldn't be right that he should. So the one thing we have to do with is that she's in fact against us. I can only work Mitchy through Petherton, but Mrs. Brook can work him straight. On the other hand that's the way you, my dear man, can work Vanderbank."

One thing evidently beyond the rest, as a result of this vivid demonstration, disengaged itself to our old friend's undismayed sense, but his consternation needed a minute or two to produce it. "I can absolutely assure you that Mr. Vanderbank entertains no sentiment for Mrs. Brookenham — !"

"That he may not keep under by just setting his teeth and holding on? I never dreamed he does, and have nothing so alarming in store for you — rassurez-vous bien! — as to propose that he shall be invited to sink a feeling for the mother in order to take one up for the child. Don't, please, flutter out of the whole question by a premature scare. I never supposed it's he who wants to keep HER. He's not in love with her — be comforted! But she's amusing — highly amusing. I do her perfect justice. As your women go she's rare. If she were French she'd be a femme d'esprit. She has invented a nuance of her own and she has done it all by

herself, for Edward figures in her drawing-room only as one of those queer extinguishers of fire in the corridors of hotels. He's just a bucket on a peg. The men, the young and the clever ones, find it a house — and heaven knows they're right — with intellectual elbow-room, with freedom of talk. Most English talk is a quadrille in a sentry-box. You'll tell me we go further in Italy, and I won't deny it, but in Italy we have the common sense not to have little girls in the room. The young men hang about Mrs. Brook, and the clever ones ply her with the uproarious appreciation that keeps her up to the mark. She's in a prodigious fix — she must sacrifice either her daughter or what she once called to me her intellectual habits. Mr. Vanderbank, you've seen for yourself, is of these one of the most cherished, the most confirmed. Three months ago — it couldn't be any longer kept off — Nanda began definitely to 'sit'; to be there and look, by the tea-table, modestly and conveniently abstracted."

"I beg your pardon — I don't think she looks that, Duchess," Mr. Longdon lucidly broke in. How much she had carried him with her in spite of himself was betrayed by the very terms of his dissent. "I don't think it would strike any one that she looks 'convenient.'"

His companion, laughing, gave a shrug. "Try her and perhaps you'll find her so!" But his objection had none the less pulled her up a little. "I don't say she's a hypocrite, for it would certainly be less decent for her to giggle and wink. It's Mrs. Brook's theory moreover, isn't it? that she has, from five to seven at least, lowered the pitch. Doesn't she pretend that she bears in mind every moment the tiresome difference made by the presence of sweet virginal eighteen?"

"I haven't, I'm afraid, a notion of what she pretends!"

Mr. Longdon had spoken with a curtness to which his friend's particular manner of overlooking it only added significance. "They've become," she pursued, "superficial or insincere or frivolous, but at least they've become, with the way the drag's put on, quite as dull as other people."

He showed no sign of taking this up; instead of it he said abruptly: "But if it isn't Mr. Mitchett's own idea?"

His fellow visitor barely hesitated. "It would be his own if he were free — and it would be Lord Petherton's FOR him. I mean by his being free Nanda's becoming definitely lost to him. Then it would be impossible for Mrs. Brook to continue to persuade him, as she does now, that by a waiting game he'll come to his chance. His chance will cease to exist, and he wants so, poor darling, to marry. You've really now seen my niece," she went on. "That's another reason why I hold you can help me."

"Yes — I've seen her."

"Well, there she is." It was as if in the pause that followed this they sat looking at little absent Aggie with a wonder that was almost equal. "The good God has given her to me," the Duchess said at last.

"It seems to me then that she herself is, in her remarkable loveliness, really your help."

"She'll be doubly so if you give me proofs that you believe in her." And the Duchess, appearing to consider that with this she had made herself clear and her interlocutor plastic, rose in confident majesty. "I leave it to you."

Mr. Longdon did the same, but with more consideration now. "Is it your expectation that I shall speak to Mr. Mitchett?"

"Don't flatter yourself he won't speak to YOU!"

Mr. Longdon made it out. "As supposing me, you mean, an interested party?"

She clapped her gloved hands for joy. "It's a delight to hear you practically admit that you ARE one! Mr. Mitchett will take anything from you — above all perfect candour. It isn't every day one meets YOUR kind, and he's a connoisseur. I leave it to you — I leave it to you."

She spoke as if it were something she had thrust bodily into his hands and wished to hurry away from. He put his hands behind him — straightening himself a little, half-kindled, still half-confused. "You're all extraordinary people!"

She gave a toss of her head that showed her as not so dazzled. "You're the best of us, caro mio — you and Aggie: for Aggie's as good as you. Mitchy's good too, however — Mitchy's beautiful. You see it's not only his money. He's a gentleman. So are you. There aren't so many. But we must move fast," she added more sharply.

"What do you mean by fast?"

"What should I mean but what I say? If Nanda doesn't get a husband early in the business—"

"Well?" said Mr. Longdon, as she appeared to pause with the weight of her idea.

“Why she won’t get one late — she won’t get one at all. One, I mean, of the kind she’ll take. She’ll have been in it over-long for THEIR taste.”

She had moved, looking off and about her — little Aggie always on her mind — to the flight of steps, where she again hung fire; and had really ended by producing in him the manner of keeping up with her to challenge her. “Been in what?”

She went down a few steps while he stood with his face full of perceptions strained and scattered. “Why in the air they themselves have infected for her!”

V

Late that night, in the smoking room, when the smokers — talkers and listeners alike — were about to disperse, Mr. Longdon asked Vanderbank to stay, and then it was that the young man, to whom all the evening he had not addressed a word, could make out why, a little unnaturally, he had prolonged his vigil. "I've something particular to say to you and I've been waiting. I hope you don't mind. It's rather important." Vanderbank expressed on the spot the liveliest desire to oblige him and, quickly lighting another cigarette, mounted again to the deep divan with which a part of the place was furnished. The smoking-room at Mertle was not unworthy of the general nobleness, and the fastidious spectator had clearly been reckoned on in the great leather-covered lounge that, raised by a step or two above the floor, applied its back to two quarters of the wall and enjoyed most immediately a view of the billiard-table. Mr. Longdon continued for a minute to roam with the air of dissimulated absence that, during the previous hour and among the other men, his companion's eye had not lost; he pushed a ball or two about, examined the form of an ash-stand, swung his glasses almost with violence and declined either to smoke or to sit down. Vanderbank, perched aloft on the bench and awaiting developments, had a little the look of some prepossessing criminal who, in court, should have changed places with the judge. He was unlike many a man of marked good looks in that the effect of evening dress was not, with a perversity often observed in such cases, to over-emphasise his fineness. His type was rather chastened than heightened, and he sat there moreover with a primary discretion quite in the note of the deference that from the first, with his friend of the elder fashion, he had taken as imposed. He had a strong sense for shades of respect and was now careful to loll scarcely more than with an official superior. "If you ask me," Mr. Longdon presently continued, "why at this hour of the night — after a day at best too heterogeneous — I don't keep over till to-morrow whatever I may have to say, I can only tell you that I appeal to you now because I've something on my mind that I shall sleep the better for being rid of."

There was space to circulate in front of the haut-pas, where he had still paced and still swung his glasses; but with these words he had paused, leaning against the billiard-table, to meet the interested urbanity of the answer they produced. "Are you very sure that having got rid of it you WILL sleep? Is it a pure confidence," Vanderbank said, "that you do me the honour to make me? Is it something terrific that requires a reply, so that I shall have to take account on my side of the rest I may deprive you of?"

"Don't take account of anything — I'm myself a man who always takes too much. It isn't a matter about which I press you for an immediate answer. You can give me no answer probably without a good deal of thought. I'VE thought a good deal — otherwise I wouldn't speak. I only want to put something before you and leave it there."

"I never see you," said Vanderbank, "that you don't put something before me."

"That sounds," his friend returned, "as if I rather overloaded — what's the sort of thing you fellows nowadays say? — your intellectual board. If there's a congestion of dishes sweep everything without scruple away. I've never put before you anything like this."

He spoke with a weight that in the great space, where it resounded a little, made an impression — an impression marked by the momentary pause that fell between them. He partly broke the silence first by beginning to walk again, and then Vanderbank broke it as through the apprehension of their becoming perhaps too solemn. "Well, you immensely interest me and you really couldn't have chosen a better time. A secret — for we shall make it that of course, shan't we? — at this witching hour, in this great old house, is all my visit here will have required to make the whole thing a rare remembrance. So I assure you the more you put before me the better."

Mr. Longdon took up another ash-tray, but with the air of doing so as a direct consequence of Vanderbank's tone. After he had laid it down he put on his glasses; then fixing his companion he brought out: "Have you no idea at all — ?"

"Of what you have in your head? Dear Mr. Longdon, how SHOULD I have?"

"Well, I'm wondering if I shouldn't perhaps have a little in your place. There's nothing that in the circumstances occurs to you as likely I should want to say?"

Vanderbank gave a laugh that might have struck an auditor as a trifle uneasy. "When you speak of 'the circumstances' you do a thing that — unless you mean the simple thrilling ones of this particular moment — always of course opens the door of the lurid for a man of any imagination. To such a man you've only to give

a nudge for his conscience to jump. That's at any rate the case with mine. It's never quite on its feet — so it's now already on its back." He stopped a little — his smile was even strained. "Is what you want to put before me something awful I've done?"

"Excuse me if I press this point." Mr. Longdon spoke kindly, but if his friend's anxiety grew his own thereby diminished. "Can you think of nothing at all?"

"Do you mean that I've done?"

"No, but that — whether you've done it or not — I may have become aware of."

There could have been no better proof than Vanderbank's expression, on this, of his having mastered the secret of humouring without appearing to patronise. "I think you ought to give me a little more of a clue."

Mr. Longdon took off his glasses. "Well — the clue's Nanda Brookenham."

"Oh I see." His friend had responded quickly, but for a minute said nothing more, and the great marble clock that gave the place the air of a club ticked louder in the stillness. Mr. Longdon waited with a benevolent want of mercy, yet with a look in his face that spoke of what depended for him — though indeed very far within — on the upshot of his patience. The hush between them, for that matter, became a conscious public measure of the young man's honesty. He evidently at last felt it as such, and there would have been for an observer of his handsome controlled face a study of some sharp things. "I judge that you ask me for such an utterance," he finally said, "as very few persons at any time have the right to expect of a man. Think of the people — and very decent ones — to whom on so many a question one must only reply that it's none of their business."

"I see you know what I mean," said Mr. Longdon.

"Then you know also the distinguished exception I make of you. There isn't another man with whom I'd talk of it."

"And even to me you don't! But I'm none the less obliged to you," Mr. Longdon added.

"It isn't only the gravity," his companion went on; "it's the ridicule that inevitably attaches — !"

The manner in which Mr. Longdon indicated the empty room was in itself an interruption. "Don't I sufficiently spare you?"

"Thank you, thank you," said Vanderbank.

"Besides, it's not for nothing."

"Of course not!" the young man returned, though with a look of noting the next moment a certain awkwardness in his concurrence. "But don't spare me now."

"I don't mean to." Mr. Longdon had his back to the table again, on which he rested with each hand on the rim. "I don't mean to," he repeated.

His victim gave a laugh that betrayed at least the drop of a tension. "Yet I don't quite see what you can do to me."

"It's just what for some time past I've been trying to think."

"And at last you've discovered?"

"Well — it has finally glimmered out a little in this extraordinary place."

Vanderbank frankly wondered. "In consequence of anything particular that has happened?"

Mr. Longdon had a pause. "For an old idiot who notices as much as I something particular's always happening. If you're a man of imagination—"

"Oh," Vanderbank broke in, "I know how much more in that case you're one! It only makes me regret," he continued, "that I've not attended more since yesterday to what you've been about."

"I've been about nothing but what among you people I'm always about. I've been seeing, feeling, thinking. That makes no show, of course I'm aware, for any one but myself, and it's wholly my own affair. Except indeed," he added, "so far as I've taken into my head to make, on it all, this special appeal. There are things that have come home to me."

"Oh I see, I see," Vanderbank showed the friendliest alertness. "I'm to take it from you then, with all the avidity of my vanity, that I strike you as the person best able to understand what they are."

Mr. Longdon appeared to wonder an instant if his intelligence now had not almost too much of a glitter: he kept the same position, his back against the table, and while Vanderbank, on the settee, pressed upright against the wall, they recognised in silence that they were trying each other. "You're much the best of them. I've my ideas about you. You've great gifts."

"Well then, we're worthy of each other. When Greek meets Greek — !" and the young man laughed while,

a little with the air of bracing himself, he folded his arms. “Here we are.”

His companion looked at him a moment longer, then, turning away, went slowly round the table. On the further side of it he stopped again and, after a minute, with a nervous movement, set a ball or two in motion. “It’s beautiful — but it’s terrible!” he finally murmured. He hadn’t his eyes on Vanderbank, who for a minute said nothing, and he presently went on: “To see it and not to want to try to help — well, I can’t do that.” Vanderbank, still neither speaking nor moving, remained as if he might interrupt something of high importance, and his friend, passing along the opposite edge of the table, continued to produce in the stillness, without the cue, the small click of the ivory. “How long — if you don’t mind my asking — have you known it?”

Even for this at first Vanderbank had no answer — none but to rise from his place, come down to the floor and, standing there, look at Mr. Longdon across the table. He was serious now, but without being solemn. “How can one tell? One can never be sure. A man may fancy, may wonder; but about a girl, a person so much younger than himself and so much more helpless, he feels a — what shall I call it?”

“A delicacy?” Mr. Longdon suggested. “It may be that; the name doesn’t matter; at all events he’s embarrassed. He wants not to be an ass on the one side and yet not some other kind of brute on the other.”

Mr. Longdon listened with consideration — with a beautiful little air indeed of being, in his all but finally benighted state, earnestly open to information on such points from a magnificent young man. “He doesn’t want, you mean, to be a coxcomb? — and he doesn’t want to be cruel?”

Vanderbank, visibly preoccupied, produced a faint kind smile. “Oh you KNOW!”

“I? I should know less than any one.” Mr. Longdon had turned away from the table on this, and the eyes of his companion, who after an instant had caught his meaning, watched him move along the room and approach another part of the divan. The consequence of the passage was that Vanderbank’s only rejoinder was presently to say: “I can’t tell you how long I’ve imagined — have asked myself. She’s so charming, so interesting, and I feel as if I had known her always. I’ve thought of one thing and another to do — and then, on purpose, haven’t thought at all. That has mostly seemed to me best.”

“Then I gather,” said Mr. Longdon, “that your interest in her — ?”

“Hasn’t the same character as her interest in ME?” Vanderbank had taken him up responsively, but after speaking looked about for a match and lighted a new cigarette. “I’m sure you understand,” he broke out, “what an extreme effort it is to me to talk of such things!”

“Yes, yes. But it’s just effort only? It gives you no pleasure? I mean the fact of her condition,” Mr. Longdon explained.

Vanderbank had really to think a little. “However much it might give me I should probably not be a fellow to gush. I’m a self-conscious stick of a Briton.”

“But even a stick of a Briton — !” Mr. Longdon faltered and hovered. “I’ve gushed in short to YOU.”

“About Lady Julia?” the young man frankly asked. “Is gushing what you call what you’ve done?”

“Say then we’re sticks of Britons. You’re not in any degree at all in love?”

There fell between them, before Vanderbank replied, another pause, of which he took advantage to move once more round the table. Mr. Longdon meanwhile had mounted to the high bench and sat there as if the judge were now in his proper place. At last his companion spoke. “What you’re coming to is of course that you’ve conceived a desire.”

“That’s it — strange as it may seem. But believe me, it has not been precipitate. I’ve watched you both.”

“Oh I knew you were watching HER,” said Vanderbank.

“To such a tune that I’ve made up my mind. I want her so to marry — !” But on the odd little quaver of longing with which he brought it out the elder man fairly hung.

“Well?” said Vanderbank.

“Well, so that on the day she does she’ll come into the interest of a considerable sum of money — already very decently invested — that I’ve determined to settle on her.”

Vanderbank’s instant admiration flushed across the room. “How awfully jolly of you — how beautiful!”

“Oh there’s a way to show practically your appreciation of it.”

But Vanderbank, for enthusiasm, scarcely heard him. “I can’t tell you how admirable I think you.” Then eagerly, “Does Nanda know it?” he demanded.

Mr. Longdon, after a wait, spoke with comparative dryness. “My idea has been that for the present you alone shall.”

Vanderbank took it in. “No other man?”

His companion looked still graver. “I need scarcely say that I depend on you to keep the fact to yourself.”

“Absolutely then and utterly. But that won’t prevent what I think of it. Nothing for a long time has given me such joy.”

Shining and sincere, he had held for a minute Mr. Longdon’s eyes. “Then you do care for her?”

“Immensely. Never, I think, so much as now. That sounds of a grossness, doesn’t it?” the young man laughed. “But your announcement really lights up the mind.”

His friend for a moment almost glowed with his pleasure. “The sum I’ve fixed upon would be, I may mention, substantial, and I should of course be prepared with a clear statement — a very definite pledge — of my intentions.”

“So much the better! Only” — Vanderbank suddenly pulled himself up— “to get it she MUST marry?”

“It’s not in my interest to allow you to suppose she needn’t, and it’s only because of my intensely wanting her marriage that I’ve spoken to you.”

“And on the ground also with it” — Vanderbank so far concurred— “of your quite taking for granted my only having to put myself forward?”

If his friend seemed to cast about it proved but to be for the fullest expression. Nothing in fact could have been more charged than the quiet way in which he presently said: “My dear boy, I back you.”

Vanderbank clearly was touched by it. “How extraordinarily kind you are to me!” Mr. Longdon’s silence appeared to reply that he was willing to let it go for that, and the young man next went on: “What it comes to then — as you put it — is that it’s a way for me to add something handsome to my income.”

Mr. Longdon sat for a little with his eyes attached to the green field of the billiard-table, vivid in the spreading suspended lamplight. “I think I ought to tell you the figure I have in mind.”

Another person present might have felt rather taxed either to determine the degree of provocation represented by Vanderbank’s considerate smile, or to say if there was an appreciable interval before he rang out: “I think, you know, you oughtn’t to do anything of the sort. Let that alone, please. The great thing is the interest — the great thing is the wish you express. It represents a view of me, an attitude toward me — !” He pulled up, dropping his arms and turning away before the complete image.

“There’s nothing in those things that need overwhelm you. It would be odd if you hadn’t yourself, about your value and your future a feeling quite as lively as any feeling of mine. There IS mine at all events. I can’t help it. Accept it. Then of the other feeling — how SHE moves me — I won’t speak.”

“You sufficiently show it!”

Mr. Longdon continued to watch the bright circle on the table, lost in which a moment he let his friend’s answer pass. “I won’t begin to you on Nanda.”

“Don’t,” said Vanderbank. But in the pause that ensued each, in one way or another, might have been thinking of her for himself.

It was broken by Mr. Longdon’s presently going on: “Of course what it superficially has the air of is my offering to pay you for taking a certain step. It’s open to you to be grand and proud — to wrap yourself in your majesty and ask if I suppose you bribeable. I haven’t spoken without having thought of that.”

“Yes,” said Vanderbank all responsively, “but it isn’t as if you proposed to me, is it, anything dreadful? If one cares for a girl one’s deucedly glad she has money. The more of anything good she has the better. I may assure you,” he added with the brightness of his friendly intelligence and quite as if to show his companion the way to be least concerned— “I may assure you that once I were disposed to act on your suggestion I’d make short work of any vulgar interpretation of my motive. I should simply try to be as fine as yourself.” He smoked, he moved about, then came up in another place. “I dare say you know that dear old Mitchy, under whose blessed roof we’re plotting this midnight treason, would marry her like a shot and without a penny.”

“I think I know everything — I think I’ve thought of everything. Mr. Mitchett,” Mr. Longdon added, “is impossible.”

Vanderbank appeared for an instant to wonder. “Wholly then through HER attitude?”

“Altogether.”

Again he hesitated. “You’ve asked her?”

“I’ve asked her.”

Once more Vanderbank faltered. “And that’s how you know?”

“About YOUR chance? That’s how I know.”

The young man, consuming his cigarette with concentration, took again several turns. “And your idea IS to give one time?”

Mr. Longdon had for a minute to turn his idea over. “How much time do you want?”

Vanderbank gave a headshake that was both restrictive and indulgent. “I must live into it a little. Your offer has been before me only these few minutes, and it’s too soon for me to commit myself to anything whatever. Except,” he added gallantly, “to my gratitude.”

Mr. Longdon, at this, on the divan, got up, as Vanderbank had previously done, under the spring of emotion; only, unlike Vanderbank, he still stood there, his hands in his pockets and his face, a little paler, directed straight. There was disappointment in him even before he spoke. “You’ve no strong enough impulse — ?”

His friend met him with admirable candour. “Wouldn’t it seem that if I had I would by this time have taken the jump?”

“Without waiting, you mean, for anybody’s money?” Mr. Longdon cultivated for a little a doubt. “Of course she has struck one as — till now — tremendously young.”

Vanderbank looked about once more for matches and occupied a time with relighting. “Till now — yes. But it’s not,” he pursued, “only because she’s so young that — for each of us, and for dear old Mitchy too — she’s so interesting.” Mr. Longdon had restlessly stepped down, and Vanderbank’s eyes followed him till he stopped again. “I make out that in spite of what you said to begin with you’re conscious of a certain pressure.”

“In the matter of time? Oh yes, I do want it DONE. That,” Nanda’s patron simply explained, “is why I myself put on the screw.” He spoke with the ring of impatience. “I want her got out.”

“‘Out’?”

“Out of her mother’s house.”

Vanderbank laughed though — more immediately — he had coloured. “Why, her mother’s house is just where I see her!”

“Precisely; and if it only weren’t we might get on faster.”

Vanderbank, for all his kindness, looked still more amused. “But if it only weren’t, as you say, I seem to understand you wouldn’t have your particular vision of urgency.”

Mr. Longdon, through adjusted glasses, took him in with a look that was sad as well as sharp, then jerked the glasses off. “Oh you do understand.”

“Ah,” said Vanderbank, “I’m a mass of corruption!”

“You may perfectly be, but you shall not,” Mr. Longdon returned with decision, “get off on any such plea. If you’re good enough for me you’re good enough, as you thoroughly know, on whatever head, for any one.”

“Thank you.” But Vanderbank, for all his happy appreciation, thought again. “We ought at any rate to remember, oughtn’t we? that we should have Mrs. Brook against us.”

His companion faltered but an instant. “Ah that’s another thing I know. But it’s also exactly why. Why I want Nanda away.”

“I see, I see.”

The response had been prompt, yet Mr. Longdon seemed suddenly to show that he suspected the superficial. “Unless it’s with Mrs. Brook you’re in love.” Then on his friend’s taking the idea with a mere headshake of negation, a repudiation that might even have astonished by its own lack of surprise, “Or unless Mrs. Brook’s in love with you,” he amended.

Vanderbank had for this any decent gaiety. “Ah that of course may perfectly be!”

“But IS it? That’s the question.”

He continued light. “If she had declared her passion shouldn’t I rather compromise her — ?”

“By letting me know?” Mr. Longdon reflected. “I’m sure I can’t say — it’s a sort of thing for which I haven’t a measure or a precedent. In my time women didn’t declare their passion. I’m thinking of what the meaning is of Mrs. Brookenham’s wanting you — as I’ve heard it called — herself.”

Vanderbank, still with his smile, smoked a minute. “That’s what you’ve heard it called?”

“Yes, but you must excuse me from telling you by whom.”

He was amused at his friend’s discretion. “It’s unimaginable. But it doesn’t matter. We all call everything — anything. The meaning of it, if you and I put it so, is — well, a modern shade.”

“You must deal then yourself,” said Mr. Longdon, “with your modern shades.” He spoke now as if the

case simply awaited such dealing.

But at this his young friend was more grave. “YOU could do nothing? — to bring, I mean, Mrs. Brook round.”

Mr. Longdon fairly started. “Propose on your behalf for her daughter? With your authority — tomorrow. Authorise me and I instantly act.”

Vanderbank’s colour again rose — his flush was complete. “How awfully you want it!”

Mr. Longdon, after a look at him, turned away. “How awfully YOU don’t!”

The young man continued to blush. “No — you must do me justice. You’ve not made a mistake about me — I see in your proposal, I think, all you can desire I should. Only YOU see it much more simply — and yet I can’t just now explain. If it WERE so simple I should say to you in a moment ‘do speak to them for me’ — I should leave the matter with delight in your hands. But I require time, let me remind you, and you haven’t yet told me how much I may take.”

This appeal had brought them again face to face, and Mr. Longdon’s first reply to it was a look at his watch. “It’s one o’clock.”

“Oh I require” — Vanderbank had recovered his pleasant humour— “more than to-night!”

Mr. Longdon went off to the smaller table that still offered to view two bedroom candles. “You must take of course the time you need. I won’t trouble you — I won’t hurry you. I’m going to bed.”

Vanderbank, overtaking him, lighted his candle for him; after which, handing it and smiling: “Shall we have conduced to your rest?”

Mr. Longdon looked at the other candle. “You’re not coming to bed?”

“To MY rest we shall not have conduced. I stay up a while longer.”

“Good.” Mr. Longdon was pleased. “You won’t forget then, as we promised, to put out the lights?”

“If you trust me for the greater you can trust me for the less. Good-night.”

Vanderbank had offered his hand. “Good-night.” But Mr. Longdon kept him a moment. “You DON’T care for my figure?”

“Not yet — not yet. PLEASE.” Vanderbank seemed really to fear it, but on Mr. Longdon’s releasing him with a little drop of disappointment they went together to the door of the room, where they had another pause.

“She’s to come down to me — alone — in September.”

Vanderbank appeared to debate and conclude. “Then may I come?”

His friend, on this footing, had to consider. “Shall you know by that time?”

“I’m afraid I can’t promise — if you must regard my coming as a pledge.”

Mr. Longdon thought on; then raising his eyes: “I don’t quite see why you won’t suffer me to tell you — !”

“The detail of your intention? I do then. You’ve said quite enough. If my visit must commit me,” Vanderbank pursued, “I’m afraid I can’t come.”

Mr. Longdon, who had passed into the corridor, gave a dry sad little laugh. “Come then — as the ladies say— ‘as you are’!”

On which, rather softly closing the door, the young man remained alone in the great emptily lighted billiard-room.

BOOK SIXTH. MRS. BROOK

Presenting himself at Buckingham Crescent three days after the Sunday spent at Mertle, Vanderbank found Lady Fanny Cashmore in the act of taking leave of Mrs. Brook and found Mrs. Brook herself in the state of muffled exaltation that was the mark of all her intercourse — and most of all perhaps of her farewells — with Lady Fanny. This splendid creature gave out, as it were, so little that Vanderbank was freshly struck with all Mrs. Brook could take in, though nothing, for that matter, in Buckingham Crescent, had been more fully formulated on behalf of the famous beauty than the imperturbable grandeur of her almost total absence of articulation. Every aspect of the phenomenon had been freely discussed there and endless ingenuity lavished on the question of how exactly it was that so much of what the world would in another case have called complete stupidity could be kept by a mere wonderful face from boring one to death. It was Mrs. Brook who, in this relation as in many others, had arrived at the supreme expression of the law, had thrown off, happily enough, to whomever it might have concerned: "My dear thing, it all comes back, as everything always does, simply to personal pluck. It's only a question, no matter when or where, of having enough. Lady Fanny has the courage of all her silence — so much therefore that it sees her completely through and is what really makes her interesting. Not to be afraid of what may happen to you when you've no more to say for yourself than a steamer without a light — that truly is the highest heroism, and Lady Fanny's greatness is that she's never afraid. She takes the risk every time she goes out — takes, as you may say, her life in her hand. She just turns that glorious mask upon you and practically says: 'No, I won't open my lips — to call it really open — for the forty minutes I shall stay; but I calmly defy you, all the same, to kill me for it.' And we don't kill her — we delight in her; though when either of us watches her in a circle of others it's like seeing a very large blind person in the middle of Oxford Street. One fairly looks about for the police." Vanderbank, before his fellow visitor withdrew it, had the benefit of the glorious mask and could scarce have failed to be amused at the manner in which Mrs. Brook alone showed the stress of thought. Lady Fanny, in the other scale, sat aloft and Olympian, so that though visibly much had happened between the two ladies it had all happened only to the hostess. The sense in the air in short was just of Lady Fanny herself, who came to an end like a banquet or a procession. Mrs. Brook left the room with her and, on coming back, was full of it. "She'll go, she'll go!"

"Go where?" Vanderbank appeared to have for the question less attention than usual.

"Well, to the place her companion will propose. Probably — like Anna Karenine — to one of the smaller Italian towns."

"Anna Karenine? She isn't a bit like Anna."

"Of course she isn't so clever," said Mrs. Brook. "But that would spoil her. So it's all right."

"I'm glad it's all right," Vanderbank laughed. "But I dare say we shall still have her with us a while."

"We shall do that, I trust, whatever happens. She'll come up again — she'll remain, I feel, one of those enormous things that fate seems somehow to have given me as the occupation of my odd moments. I don't see," Mrs. Brook added, "what still keeps her on the edge, which isn't an inch wide."

Vanderbank looked this time as if he only tried to wonder. "Isn't it YOU?"

Mrs. Brook mused more deeply. "Sometimes I think so. But I don't know."

"Yes, how CAN you of course know, since she can't tell you?"

"Oh if I depended on her telling — !" Mrs. Brook shook out with this a sofa-cushion or two and sank into the corner she had arranged. The August afternoon was hot and the London air heavy; the room moreover, though agreeably bedimmed, gave out the staleness of the season's end. "If you hadn't come to-day," she went on, "you'd have missed me till I don't know when, for we've let the Hovel again — wretchedly, but still we've let it — and I go down on Friday to see that it isn't too filthy. Edward, who's furious at what I've taken for it, had his idea that we should go there this year ourselves."

"And now" — Vanderbank took her up— "that fond fancy has become simply the ghost of a dead thought, a ghost that, in company with a thousand predecessors, haunts the house in the twilight and pops at you out of odd corners."

"Oh Edward's dead thoughts are indeed a cheerful company and worthy of the perpetual mental mourning we seem to go about in. They're worse than the relations we're always losing without seeming to have any fewer, and I expect every day to hear that the Morning Post regrets to have to announce in that line too some new bereavement. The apparitions following the deaths of so many thoughts ARE particularly awful in the

twilight, so that at this season, while the day drags and drags, I'm glad to have any one with me who may keep them at a distance."

Vanderbank had not sat down; slowly, familiarly he turned about. "And where's Nanda?"

"Oh SHE doesn't help — she attracts rather the worst of the bogies. Edward and Nanda and Harold and I seated together are fairly a case for that — what do you call it? — investigating Society. Deprived of the sweet resource of the Hovel," Mrs. Brook continued, "we shall each, from about the tenth on, forage somehow or other for ourselves. Mitchy perhaps," she added, "will insist on taking us to Baireuth."

"That will be the form, you mean, of his own forage?"

Mrs. Brook just hesitated. "Unless you should prefer to take it as the form of yours."

Vanderbank appeared for a moment obligingly enough to turn this over, but with the effect of noting an objection. "Oh I'm afraid I shall have to grind straight through the month and that by the time I'm free every Ring at Baireuth will certainly have been rung. Is it your idea to take Nanda?" he asked.

She reached out for another cushion. "If it's impossible for you to manage what I suggest why should that question interest you?"

"My dear woman" — and her visitor dropped into a chair— "do you suppose my interest depends on such poverties as what I can 'manage'? You know well enough," he went on in another tone, "why I care for Nanda and enquire about her."

She was perfectly ready. "I know it, but only as a bad reason. Don't be too sure!"

For a moment they looked at each other. "Don't be so sure, you mean, that the elation of it may go to my head? Are you really warning me against vanity?"

"Your 'reallys,' my dear Van, are a little formidable, but it strikes me that before I tell you there's something I've a right to ask. Are you 'really' what they call thinking of my daughter?"

"Your asking," Vanderbank returned, "exactly shows the state of your knowledge of the matter. I don't quite see moreover why you speak as if I were paying an abrupt and unnatural attention. What have I done the last three months but talk to you about her? What have you done but talk to ME about her? From the moment you first spoke to me— 'monstrously,' I remember you called it — of the difference made in your social life by her finally established, her perpetual, her inexorable participation: from that moment what have we both done but put our heads together over the question of keeping the place tidy, as you called it — or as *I* called it, was it? — for the young female mind?"

Mrs. Brook faced serenely enough the directness of this challenge. "Well, what are you coming to? I spoke of the change in my life of course; I happen to be so constituted that my life has something to do with my mind and my mind something to do with my talk. Good talk: you know — no one, dear Van, should know better — what part for me that plays. Therefore when one has deliberately to make one's talk bad — !"

"'Bad'?" Vanderbank, in his amusement, fell back in his chair. "Dear Mrs. Brook, you're too delightful!"

"You know what I mean — stupid, flat, fourth-rate. When one has to haul in sail to that degree — and for a perfectly outside reason — there's nothing strange in one's taking a friend sometimes into the confidence of one's irritation."

"Ah," Vanderbank protested, "you do yourself injustice. Irritation hasn't been for you the only consequence of the affair."

Mrs. Brook gloomily thought. "No, no — I've had my calmness: the calmness of deep despair. I've seemed to see everything go."

"Oh how can you say that," her visitor demanded, "when just what we've most been agreed upon so often is the practical impossibility of making any change? Hasn't it seemed as if we really can't overcome conversational habits so thoroughly formed?"

Again Mrs. Brook reflected. "As if our way of looking at things were too serious to be trifled with? I don't know — I think it's only you who have denied our sacrifices, our compromises and concessions. I myself have constantly felt smothered in them. But there it is," she impatiently went on. "What I don't admit is that you've given me ground to take for a proof of your 'intentions' — to use the odious term — your association with me on behalf of the preposterous fiction, as it after all is, of Nanda's blankness of mind."

Vanderbank's head, in his chair, was thrown back; his eyes ranged over the top of the room. "There never has been any mystery about my thinking her — all in her own way — the nicest girl in London. She IS."

His companion was silent a little. "She is, by all means. Well," she then added, "so far as I may have been alive to the fact of any one's thinking her so, it's not out of place I should mention to you the difference made

in my appreciation of it by our delightful little stay at Mertle. My views for Nanda," said Mrs. Brook, "have somehow gone up."

Vanderbank was prompt to show how he could understand it. "So that you wouldn't consider even Mitchy now?"

But his friend took no notice of the question. "The way Mr. Longdon distinguishes her is quite the sort of thing that gives a girl, as Harold says, a 'leg up.' It's awfully curious and has made me think: he isn't anything whatever, as London estimates go, in himself — so that what is it, pray, that makes him, when 'added on' to her, so double Nanda's value? I somehow or other see, through his being known to back her and through the pretty story of his loyalty to mamma and all the rest of it (oh if one chose to WORK that!) ever so much more of a chance for her."

Vanderbank's eyes were on the ceiling. "It IS curious, isn't it? — though I think he's rather more 'in himself,' even for the London estimate, than you quite understand." He appeared to give her time to take this up, but as she said nothing he pursued: "I dare say that if even I now WERE to enter myself it would strike you as too late."

Her attention to this was but indirect. "It's awfully vulgar to be talking about it, but I can't help feeling that something possibly rather big will come of Mr. Longdon."

"Ah we've touched on that before," said Vanderbank, "and you know you did think something might come even for me."

She continued however, as if she scarce heard him, to work out her own vision. "It's very true that up to now—"

"Well, up to now?" he asked as she faltered.

She faltered still a little. "I do say the most hideous things. But we HAVE said worse, haven't we? Up to now, I mean, he hasn't given her anything. Unless indeed," she mused, "she may have had something without telling me."

Vanderbank went much straighter. "What sort of thing have you in mind? Are you thinking of money?"

"Yes. Isn't it awful?"

"That you should think of it?"

"That I should talk this way." Her friend was apparently not prepared with an assent, and she quickly enough pursued: "If he HAD given her any it would come out somehow in her expenditure. She has tremendous liberty and is very secretive, but still it would come out."

"He wouldn't give her any without letting you know. Nor would she, without doing so," Vanderbank added, "take it."

"Ah," Mrs. Brook quietly said, "she hates me enough for anything."

"That's only your romantic theory."

Once more she appeared not to hear him; she gave the discussion another turn. "Has he given YOU anything?"

Her visitor smiled. "Not so much as a cigarette. I've always my pockets full of them, and HE never: so he only takes mine. Oh Mrs. Brook," he continued, "with me too — though I've also tremendous liberty! — it would come out."

"I think you'd let me know," she returned.

"Yes, I'd let you know."

Silence, upon this, fell between them a little; which she was the first to break. "She has gone with him this afternoon — by solemn appointment — to the South Kensington Museum."

There was something in Mrs. Brook's dolorous drop that yet presented the news as a portent so great that he was moved again to mirth. "Ah that's where she is? Then I confess she has scored. He has never taken ME to the South Kensington Museum."

"You were asking what we're going to do," she went on. "What I meant was — about Baireuth — that the question for Nanda's simplified. He has pressed her so to pay him a visit."

Vanderbank's assent was marked. "I see: so that if you do go abroad she'll be provided for by that engagement."

"And by lots of other invitations."

These were such things as, for the most part, the young man could turn over. "Do you mean you'd let her go alone — ?"

"To wherever she's asked?" said Mrs. Brook. "Why not? Don't talk like the Duchess."

Vanderbank seemed for a moment to try not to. "Couldn't Mr. Longdon take her? Why not?"

His friend looked really struck with it. "That WOULD be working him. But to a beautiful end!" she meditated. "The only thing would be to get him also asked."

"Ah but there you are, don't you see? Fancy 'getting' Mr. Longdon anything or anywhere whatever! Don't you feel," Vanderbank threw out, "how the impossibility of exerting that sort of patronage for him immediately places him?"

Mrs. Brook gave her companion one of those fitful glances of almost grateful appreciation with which their intercourse was even at its darkest hours frequently illumined. "As if he were the Primate or the French Ambassador? Yes, you're right — one couldn't do it; though it's very odd and one doesn't quite see why. It does place him. But he becomes thereby exactly the very sort of person with whom it would be most of an advantage for her to go about. What a pity," Mrs. Brook sighed, "he doesn't know more people!"

"Ah well, we ARE, in our way, bringing that to pass. Only we mustn't rush it. Leave it to Nanda herself," Vanderbank presently added; on which his companion so manifestly left it that she touched after a moment's silence on quite a different matter. "I dare say he'd tell YOU — wouldn't he? — if he were to give her any considerable sum."

She had only obeyed his injunction, but he stared at the length of her jump. "He might attempt to do so, but I shouldn't at all like it." He was moved immediately to dismiss this branch of the subject and, apparently to help himself, take up another. "Do you mean she understands he has asked her down for a regular long stay?"

Mrs. Brook barely hesitated. "She understands, I think, that what I expect of her is to make it as long as possible."

Vanderbank laughed out — as it was even after ten years still possible to laugh — at the childlike innocence with which her voice could invest the hardest teachings of life; then with something a trifle nervous in the whole sound and manner he sprang up from his chair. "What a blessing he is to us all!"

"Yes, but think what we must be to HIM."

"An immense interest, no doubt." He took a few aimless steps and, stooping over a basket of flowers, inhaled it with violence, almost buried his face. "I dare say we ARE interesting." He had spoken rather vaguely, but Mrs. Brook knew exactly why. "We render him no end of a service. We keep him in touch with old memories."

Vanderbank had reached one of the windows, shaded from without by a great striped sun-blind beneath which and between the flower-pots of the balcony he could see a stretch of hot relaxed street. He looked a minute at these things. "I do so like your phrases!"

She had a pause that challenged his tone. "Do you call mamma a 'phrase'?"

He went off again, quite with extravagance, but quickly, leaving the window, pulled himself up. "I dare say we MUST put things for him — he does it, cares or is able to do it, so little himself."

"Precisely. He just quietly acts. That's his nature, dear thing. We must LET him act."

Vanderbank seemed to stifle again too vivid a sense of her particular emphasis. "Yes, yes — we must let him."

"Though it won't prevent Nanda, I imagine," his hostess pursued, "from finding the fun of a whole month at Beccles — or whatever she puts in — not exactly fast and furious."

Vanderbank had the look of measuring what the girl might "put in." "The place will be quiet, of course, but when a person's so fond of a person — !"

"As she is of him, you mean?"

He hesitated. "Yes. Then it's all right."

"She IS fond of him, thank God!" said Mrs. Brook.

He was before her now with the air of a man who had suddenly determined on a great blind leap. "Do you know what he has done? He wants me so to marry her that he has proposed a definite basis."

Mrs. Brook got straight up. "'Proposed'? To HER?"

"No, I don't think he has said a word to Nanda — in fact I'm sure that, very properly, he doesn't mean to. But he spoke to me on Sunday night at Mertle — I had a big talk with him there alone, very late, in the smoking-room." Mrs. Brook's stare was serious, and Vanderbank now went on as if the sound of his voice helped him to meet it. "We had things out very much and his kindness was extraordinary — he's the most

beautiful old boy that ever lived. I don't know, now that I come to think of it, if I'm within my rights in telling you — and of course I shall immediately let him know that I HAVE told you; but I feel I can't arrive at any respectable sort of attitude in the matter without taking you into my confidence. Which is really what I came here to-day to do, though till this moment I've funked it."

It was either, as her friends chose to think it, an advantage or a drawback of intercourse with Mrs. Brook that, her face being at any moment charged with the woe of the world, it was unavoidable to remain rather in the dark as to the effect there of particular strokes. Something in Vanderbank's present study of the signs accordingly showed he had had to learn to feel his way and had more or less mastered the trick. That she had turned a little pale was really the one fresh mark. "'Funked' it? Why in the world — ?" His own colour deepened at her accent, which was a sufficient light on his having been stupid. "Do you mean you've declined the arrangement?"

He only, with a smile somewhat strained, continued for a moment to look at her; clearly, however, at last feeling, and not much caring, that he got in still deeper. "You're magnificent. You're magnificent."

Her lovely gaze widened out. "Comment donc? Where — why? You HAVE declined her?" she went on. After which, as he replied only with a slow head-shake that seemed to say it was not for the moment all so simple as that, she had one of the inspirations to which she was constitutionally subject. "Do you imagine I want you myself?"

"Dear Mrs. Brook, you're so admirable," he returned with gaiety, "that if by any chance you did, upon my honour, I don't see how I should be able not to say 'All right.'" But he spoke too more responsibly. "I was shy of really bringing out to you what has happened to me, for a reason that I've of course to look in the face. Whatever you want yourself, for Nanda you want Mitchy."

"I see, I see." She did full justice to his explanation. "And what did you say about a 'basis'? The blessed man offers to settle — ?"

"You're a real prodigy," her visitor answered, "and your imagination takes its fences in a way that, when I'm out with you, quite puts mine to shame. When he mentioned it to me I was quite surprised."

"And I," Mrs. Brook asked, "am not surprised a bit? Isn't it only," she modestly suggested, "because I've taken him in more than you? Didn't you know he WOULD?" she quavered.

Vanderbank thought or at least pretended to. "Make ME the condition? How could I be sure of it?"

But the point of his question was lost for her in the growing light. "Oh then the condition's 'you' only — ?"

"That, at any rate, is all I have to do with. He's ready to settle if I'm ready to do the rest."

"To propose to her straight, you mean?" She waited, but as he said nothing she went on: "And you're not ready. Is that it?"

"I'm taking my time."

"Of course you know," said Mrs. Brook, "that she'd jump at you."

He turned away from her now, but after some steps came back. "Then you do admit it."

She hesitated. "To YOU."

He had a strange faint smile. "Well, as I don't speak of it — !"

"No — only to me. What is it he settles?" Mrs. Brook demanded.

"I can't tell you."

"You didn't ask?"

"On the contrary I stopped him off."

"Oh then," Mrs. Brook exclaimed, "that's what I call declining."

The words appeared for an instant to strike her companion. "Is it? Is it?" he almost musingly repeated. But he shook himself the next moment free of his wonder, was more what would have been called in Buckingham Crescent on the spot. "Isn't there rather something in my having thus thought it my duty to warn you that I'm definitely his candidate?"

Mrs. Brook turned impatiently away. "You've certainly — with your talk about 'warning' — the happiest expressions!" She put her face into the flowers as he had done just before; then as she raised it: "What kind of a monster are you trying to make me out?"

"My dear lady" — Vanderbank was prompt— "I really don't think I say anything but what's fair. Isn't it just my loyalty to you in fact that has in this case positively strained my discretion?"

She shook her head in mere mild despair. "'Loyalty' again is exquisite. The tact of men has a charm quite

its own. And you're rather good," she continued, "as men go."

His laugh was now a little awkward, as if she had already succeeded in making him uncomfortable. "I always become aware with you sooner or later that they don't go at all — in your sense: but how am I, after all, so far out if you HAVE put your money on another man?"

"You keep coming back to that?" she wearily sighed.

He thought a little. "No, then. You've only to tell me not to, and I'll never speak of it again."

"You'll be in an odd position for speaking of it if you do really go in. You deny that you've declined," said Mrs. Brook; "which means then that you've allowed our friend to hope."

Vanderbank met it bravely. "Yes, I think he hopes."

"And communicates his hope to my child?"

This arrested the young man, but only for a moment. "I've the most perfect faith in his wisdom with her. I trust his particular delicacy. He cares more for her," he presently added, "even than we do."

Mrs. Brook gazed away at the infinite of space. "'We,' my dear Van," she at last returned, "is one of your own real, wonderful touches. But there's something in what you say: I HAVE, as between ourselves — between me and him — been backing Mitchy. That is I've been saying to him 'Wait, wait: don't at any rate do anything else.' Only it's just from the depth of my thought for my daughter's happiness that I've clung to this resource. He would so absolutely, so unreservedly do anything for her." She had reached now, with her extraordinary self-control, the pitch of quiet bland demonstration. "I want the poor thing, que diable, to have another string to her bow and another loaf, for her desolate old age, on the shelf. When everything else is gone Mitchy will still be there. Then it will be at least her own fault — !" Mrs. Brook continued. "What can relieve me of the primary duty of taking precautions," she wound up, "when I know as well as that I stand here and look at you—"

"Yes, what?" he asked as she just paused.

"Why that so far as they count on you they count, my dear Van, on a blank." Holding him a minute as with the soft low voice of his fate, she sadly but firmly shook her head. "You won't do it."

"Oh!" he almost too loudly protested.

"You won't do it," she went on.

"I SAY!" — he made a joke of it.

"You won't do it," she repeated.

It was as if he couldn't at last but show himself really struck; yet what he exclaimed on was what might in truth most have impressed him. "You ARE magnificent, really!"

"Mr. Mitchett!" the butler, appearing at the door, almost familiarly dropped; after which Vanderbank turned straight to the person announced.

Mr. Mitchett was there, and, anticipating Mrs. Brook in receiving him, her companion passed it straighten. "She's magnificent!"

Mitchy was already all interest. "Rather! But what's her last?"

It had been, though so great, so subtle, as they said in Buckingham Crescent, that Vanderbank scarce knew how to put it. "Well, she's so thoroughly superior."

"Oh to whom do you say it?" Mitchy cried as he greeted her.

II

The subject of this eulogy had meanwhile returned to her sofa, where she received the homage of her new visitor. “It’s not I who am magnificent a bit — it’s dear Mr. Longdon. I’ve just had from Van the most wonderful piece of news about him — his announcement of his wish to make it worth somebody’s while to marry my child.”

“‘Make it’?” — Mitchy stared. “But ISN’T it?”

“My dear friend, you must ask Van. Of course you’ve always thought so. But I must tell you all the same,” Mrs. Brook went on, “that I’m delighted.”

Mitchy had seated himself, but Vanderbank remained erect and became perhaps even slightly stiff. He was not angry — no member of the inner circle at Buckingham Crescent was ever angry — but he looked grave and rather troubled. “Even if it IS decidedly fine” — he addressed his hostess straight— “I can’t make out quite why you’re doing THIS — I mean immediately making it known.”

“Ah but what do we keep from Mitchy?” Mrs. Brook asked.

“What CAN you keep? It comes to the same thing,” Mitchy said. “Besides, here we are together, share and share alike — one beautiful intelligence. Mr. Longdon’s ‘somebody’ is of course Van. Don’t try to treat me as an outsider.”

Vanderbank looked a little foolishly, though it was but the shade of a shade, from one of them to the other. “I think I’ve been rather an ass!”

“What then by the terms of our friendship — just as Mitchy says — can he and I have a better right to know and to feel with you about? You’ll want, Mitchy, won’t you?” Mrs. Brook went on, “to hear all about THAT?”

“Oh I only mean,” Vanderbank explained, “in having just now blurted my tale out to you. However, I of course do know,” he pursued to Mitchy, “that whatever’s really between us will remain between us. Let me then tell you myself exactly what’s the matter.” The length of his pause after these words showed at last that he had stopped short; on which his companions, as they waited, exchanged a sympathetic look. They waited another minute, and then he dropped into a chair where, leaning forward, his elbows on the arms and his gaze attached to the carpet, he drew out the silence. Finally he looked at Mrs. Brook. “YOU make it clear.”

The appeal called up for some reason her most infantine manner. “I don’t think I CAN, dear Van — really CLEAR. You know however yourself,” she continued to Mitchy, “enough by this time about Mr. Longdon and mamma.”

“Oh rather!” Mitchy laughed.

“And about mamma and Nanda.”

“Oh perfectly: the way Nanda reminds him, and the ‘beautiful loyalty’ that has made him take such a fancy to her. But I’ve already embraced the facts — you needn’t dot any i’s.” With another glance at his fellow visitor Mitchy jumped up and stood there florid. “He has offered you money to marry her.” He said this to Vanderbank as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Oh NO” Mrs. Brook interposed with promptitude: “he has simply let him know before any one else that the money’s there FOR Nanda, and that therefore — !”

“First come first served?” Mitchy had already taken her up. “I see, I see. Then to make her sure of the money,” he put to Vanderbank, “you MUST marry her?”

“If it depends upon that she’ll never get it,” Mrs. Brook returned. “Dear Van will think conscientiously a lot about it, but he won’t do it.”

“Won’t you, Van, really?” Mitchy asked from the hearth-rug.

“Never, never. We shall be very kind to him, we shall help him, hope and pray for him, but we shall be at the end,” said Mrs. Brook, “just where we are now. Dear Van will have done his best, and we shall have done ours. Mr. Longdon will have done his — poor Nanda even will have done hers. But it will all have been in vain. However,” Mrs. Brook continued to expound, “she’ll probably have the money. Mr. Longdon will surely consider that she’ll want it if she doesn’t marry still more than if she does. So we shall be SO much at least,” she wound up— “I mean Edward and I and the child will be — to the good.”

Mitchy, for an equal certainty, required but an instant’s thought. “Oh there can be no doubt about THAT. The things about which your mind may now be at ease — !” he cheerfully exclaimed.

“It does make a great difference!” Mrs. Brook comfortably sighed. Then in a different tone: “What dear Van will find at the end that he can’t face will be, don’t you see? just this fact of appearing to have accepted a bribe. He won’t want, on the one hand — out of kindness for Nanda — to have the money suppressed; and yet he won’t want to have the pecuniary question mixed up with the matter: to look in short as if he had had to be paid. He’s like you, you know — he’s proud; and it will be there we shall break down.”

Mitchy had been watching his friend, who, a few minutes before perceptibly embarrassed, had quite recovered himself and, at his ease, though still perhaps with a smile a trifle strained, leaned back and let his eyes play everywhere but over the faces of the others. Vanderbank evidently wished now to show a good-humoured detachment.

“See here,” Mitchy said to him: “I remember your once submitting to me a case of some delicacy.”

“Oh he’ll submit it to you — he’ll submit it even to ME” Mrs. Brook broke in. “He’ll be charming, touching, confiding — above all he’ll be awfully INTERESTING about it. But he’ll make up his mind in his own way, and his own way won’t be to accommodate Mr. Longdon.”

Mitchy continued to study their companion in the light of these remarks, then turned upon his hostess his sociable glare. “Splendid, isn’t it, the old boy’s infatuation with him?”

Mrs. Brook just delayed. “From the point of view of the immense interest it — just now, for instance — makes for you and me? Oh yes, it’s one of our best things yet. It places him a little with Lady Fanny— ‘He will, he won’t; he won’t, he will!’ Only, to be perfect, it lacks, as I say, the element of real suspense.”

Mitchy frankly wondered. “It does, you think? Not for me — not wholly.” He turned again quite pleadingly to their friend. “I hope it doesn’t for yourself totally either?”

Vanderbank, cultivating his detachment, made at first no more reply than if he had not heard, and the others meanwhile showed faces that testified perhaps less than their respective speeches had done to the absence of anxiety. The only token he immediately gave was to get up and approach Mitchy, before whom he stood a minute laughing kindly enough, though not altogether gaily. As if then for a better proof of gaiety he presently seized him by the shoulders and, still without speaking, pushed him backward into the chair he himself had just quitted. Mrs. Brook’s eyes, from the sofa, while this went on, attached themselves to her visitors. It took Vanderbank, as he moved about and his companions waited, a minute longer to produce what he had in mind. “What IS splendid, as we call it, is this extraordinary freedom and good humour of our intercourse and the fact that we do care — so independently of our personal interests, with so little selfishness or other vulgarity — to get at the idea of things. The beautiful specimen Mrs. Brook had just given me of that,” he continued to Mitchy, “was what made me break out to you about her when you came in.” He spoke to one friend, but he looked at the other. “What’s really ‘superior’ in her is that, though I suddenly show her an interference with a favourite plan, her personal resentment’s nothing — all she wants is to see what may really happen, to take in the truth of the case and make the best of that. She offers me the truth, as she sees it, about myself, and with no nasty elation if it does chance to be the truth that suits her best. It was a charming, charming stroke.”

Mitchy’s appreciation was no bar to his amusement. “You’re wonderfully right about us. But still it was a stroke.”

If Mrs. Brook was less diverted she followed perhaps more closely. “If you do me so much justice then, why did you put to me such a cold cruel question? — I mean when you so oddly challenged me on my handing on your news to Mitchy. If the principal beauty of our effort to live together is — and quite according to your own eloquence — in our sincerity, I simply obeyed the impulse to do the sincere thing. If we’re not sincere we’re nothing.”

“Nothing!” — it was Mitchy who first responded. “But we ARE sincere.”

“Yes, we ARE sincere,” Vanderbank presently said. “It’s a great chance for us not to fall below ourselves: no doubt therefore we shall continue to soar and sing. We pay for it, people who don’t like us say, in our self-consciousness—”

“But people who don’t like us,” Mitchy broke in, “don’t matter. Besides, how can we be properly conscious of each other — ?”

“That’s it!” — Vanderbank completed his idea: “without my finding myself for instance in you and Mrs. Brook? We see ourselves reflected — we’re conscious of the charming whole. I thank you,” he pursued after an instant to Mrs. Brook— “I thank you for your sincerity.”

It was a business sometimes really to hold her eyes, but they had, it must be said for her, their steady

moments. She exchanged with Vanderbank a somewhat remarkable look, then, with an art of her own, broke short off without appearing to drop him. “The thing is, don’t you think?” — she appealed to Mitchy— “for us not to be so awfully clever as to make it believed that we can never be simple. We mustn’t see TOO tremendous things — even in each other.” She quite lost patience with the danger she glanced at. “We CAN be simple!”

“We CAN, by God!” Mitchy laughed.

“Well, we are now — and it’s a great comfort to have it settled,” said Vanderbank.

“Then you see,” Mrs. Brook returned, “what a mistake you’d make to see abysses of subtlety in my having been merely natural.”

“We CAN be natural,” Mitchy declared.

“We can, by God!” Vanderbank laughed.

Mrs. Brook had turned to Mitchy. “I just wanted you to know. So I spoke. It’s not more complicated than that. As for WHY I wanted you to know — !”

“What better reason could there be,” Mitchy interrupted, “than your being filled to the finger-tips with the sense of how I would want it myself, and of the misery, the absolute pathos, of my being left out? Fancy, my dear chap” — he had only to put it to Van— “my NOT knowing!”.

Vanderbank evidently couldn’t fancy it, but he said quietly enough: “I should have told you myself.”

“Well, what’s the difference?”

“Oh there IS a difference,” Mrs. Brook loyally said. Then she opened an inch or two, for Vanderbank, the door of her dim radiance. “Only I should have thought it a difference for the better. Of course,” she added, “it remains absolutely with us three alone, and don’t you already feel from it the fresh charm — with it here between us — of our being together?”

It was as if each of the men had waited for the other to assent better than he himself could and Mitchy then, as Vanderbank failed, had gracefully, to cover him, changed the subject. “But isn’t Nanda, the person most interested, to know?”

Vanderbank gave on this a strange sound of hilarity. “Ah that would finish it off!”

It produced for a few seconds something like a chill, a chill that had for consequence a momentary pause which in its turn added weight to the words next uttered. “It’s not I who shall tell her,” Mrs. Brook said gently and gravely. “There! — you may be sure. If you want a promise, it’s a promise. So that if Mr. Longdon’s silent,” she went on, “and you are, Mitchy, and I am, how in the world shall she have a suspicion?”

“You mean of course except by Van’s deciding to mention it himself.”

Van might have been, from the way they looked at him, some beautiful unconscious object; but Mrs. Brook was quite ready to answer. “Oh poor man, HE’LL never breathe.”

“I see. So there we are.”

To this discussion the subject of it had for the time nothing to contribute, even when Mitchy, rising with the words he had last uttered from the chair in which he had been placed, took sociably as well, on the hearth-rug, a position before their hostess. This move ministered apparently to Vanderbank’s mere silence, for it was still without speaking that, after a little, he turned away from his friend and dropped once more into the same seat. “I’ve shown you already, you of course remember,” Vanderbank presently said to him, “that I’m perfectly aware of how much better Mrs. Brook would like YOU for the position.”

“He thinks I want him myself,” Mrs. Brook blandly explained.

She was indeed, as they always thought her, “wonderful,” but she was perhaps not even now so much so as Mitchy found himself able to be. “But how would you lose old Van — even at the worst?” he earnestly asked of her.

She just hesitated. “What do you mean by the worst?”

“Then even at the best,” Mitchy smiled. “In the event of his falsifying your prediction; which, by the way, has the danger, hasn’t it? — I mean for your intellectual credit — of making him, as we all used to be called by our nursemaids, ‘contrairy.’”

“Oh I’ve thought of that,” Mrs. Brook returned. “But he won’t do, on the whole, even for the sweetness of spiting me, what he won’t want to do. *I* haven’t said I should lose him,” she went on; “that’s only the view he himself takes — or, to do him perfect justice, the idea he candidly imputes to me; though without, I imagine — for I don’t go so far as that — attributing to me anything so unutterably bete as a feeling of jealousy.”

“You wouldn’t dream of my supposing anything inept of you,” Vanderbank said on this, “if you

understood to the full how I keep on admiring you. Only what stupefies me a little," he continued, "is the extraordinary critical freedom — or we may call it if we like the high intellectual detachment — with which we discuss a question touching you, dear Mrs. Brook, so nearly and engaging so your private and most sacred sentiments. What are we playing with, after all, but the idea of Nanda's happiness?"

"Oh I'm not playing!" Mrs. Brook declared with a little rattle of emotion.

"She's not playing" — Mr. Mitchett gravely confirmed it. "Don't you feel in the very air the vibration of the passion that she's simply too charming to shake at the window as the housemaid shakes the tablecloth or the jingo the flag?" Then he took up what Vanderbank had previously said. "Of course, my dear man, I'm 'aware,' as you just now put it, of everything, and I'm not indiscreet, am I, Mrs. Brook? in admitting for you as well as for myself that there WAS an impossibility you and I used sometimes to turn over together. Only — Lord bless us all! — it isn't as if I hadn't long ago seen that there's nothing at all FOR me."

"Ah wait, wait!" Mrs. Brook put in. "She has a theory" — Vanderbank, from his chair, lighted it up for Mitchy, who hovered before them— "that your chance WILL come, later on, after I've given my measure."

"Oh but that's exactly," Mitchy was quick to respond, "what you'll never do! You won't give your measure the least little bit. You'll walk in magnificent mystery 'later on' not a bit less than you do today; you'll continue to have the benefit of everything that our imagination, perpetually engaged, often baffled and never fatigued, will continue to bedeck you with. Nanda, in the same way, to the end of all her time, will simply remain exquisite, or genuine, or generous — whatever we choose to call it. It may make a difference to us, who are comparatively vulgar, but what difference will it make to HER whether you do or you don't decide for her? You can't belong to her more, for herself, than you do already — and that's precisely so much that there's no room for any one else. Where therefore, without that room, do I come in?"

"Nowhere, I see," Vanderbank seemed obligingly to muse.

Mrs. Brook had followed Mitchy with marked admiration, but she gave on this a glance at Van that was like the toss of a blossom from the same branch. "Oh then shall I just go on with you BOTH? That WILL be joy!" She had, however, the next thing, a sudden drop which shaded the picture. "You're so divine, Mitchy, that how can you not in the long-run break ANY woman down?"

It was not as if Mitchy was struck — it was only that he was courteous. "What do you call the long-run? Taking about till I'm eighty?"

"Ah your genius is of a kind to which middle life will be particularly favourable. You'll reap then somehow, one feels, everything you've sown."

Mitchy still accepted the prophecy only to control it. "Do you call eighty middle life? Why, my moral beauty, my dear woman — if that's what you mean by my genius — is precisely my curse. What on earth — is left for a man just rotten with goodness? It renders necessary the kind of liking that renders unnecessary anything else."

"Now that IS cheap paradox!" Vanderbank patiently sighed. "You're down for a fine."

It was with less of the patience perhaps that Mrs. Brook took this up. "Yes, on that we ARE stiff. Five pounds, please."

Mitchy drew out his pocket-book even though he explained. "What I mean is that I don't give out the great thing." With which he produced a crisp banknote.

"DON'T you?" asked Vanderbank, who, having taken it from him to hand to Mrs. Brook, held it a moment, delicately, to accentuate the doubt.

"The great thing's the sacred terror. It's you who give THAT out."

"Oh!" — and Vanderbank laid the money on the small stand at Mrs. Brook's elbow.

"Ain't I right, Mrs. Brook? — doesn't he, tremendously, and isn't that more than anything else what does it?"

The two again, as if they understood each other, gazed in a unity of interest at their companion, who sustained it with an air clearly intended as the happy mean between embarrassment and triumph. Then Mrs. Brook showed she liked the phrase. "The sacred terror! Yes, one feels it. It IS that."

"The finest case of it," Mitchy pursued, "that I've ever met. So my moral's sufficiently pointed."

"Oh I don't think it can be said to be that," Vanderbank returned, "till you've put the whole thing into a box by doing for Nanda what she does most want you to do."

Mitchy caught on without a shade of wonder. "Oh by proposing to the Duchess for little Aggie?" He took but an instant to turn it over. "Well, I WOULD propose — to please Nanda. Only I've never yet quite made

out the reason of her wish."

"The reason is largely," his friend answered, "that, being very fond of Aggie and in fact extremely admiring her, she wants to do something good for her and to keep her from anything bad. Don't you know — it's too charming — she regularly believes in her?" Mitchy, with all his recognition, vibrated to the touch. "Isn't it too charming?"

"Well then," Vanderbank went on, "she secures for her friend a phoenix like you, and secures for you a phoenix like her friend. It's hard to say for which of you she desires most to do the handsome thing. She loves you both in short" — he followed it up— "though perhaps when one thinks of it the price she puts on you, Mitchy, in the arrangement, is a little the higher. Awfully fine at any rate — and yet awfully odd too — her feeling for Aggie's type, which is divided by such abysses from her own."

"Ah," laughed Mitchy, "but think then of her feeling for mine!"

Vanderbank, still more at his ease now and with his head back, had his eyes aloft and far. "Oh there are things in Nanda — !" The others exchanged a glance at this, while their companion added: "Little Aggie's really the sort of creature she would have liked to be able to be."

"Well," Mitchy said, "I should have adored her even if she HAD been able."

Mrs. Brook had for some minutes played no audible part, but the acute observer we are constantly taking for granted would perhaps have detected in her, as one of the effects of the special complexion to-day of Vanderbank's presence, a certain smothered irritation. "She couldn't possibly have been able," she now interposed, "with so loose — or rather, to express it more properly, with so perverse — a mother."

"And yet, my dear lady," Mitchy promptly qualified, "how if in little Aggie's case the Duchess hasn't prevented — ?"

Mrs. Brook was full of wisdom. "Well, it's a different thing. I'm not, as a mother — am I, Van? — bad ENOUGH. That's what's the matter with me. Aggie, don't you see? is the Duchess's morality, her virtue; which, by having it that way outside of you, as one may say, you can make a much better thing of. The child has been for Jane, I admit, a capital little subject, but Jane has kept her on hand and finished her like some wonderful piece of stitching. Oh as work it's of a soigne! There it is — to show. A woman like me has to be HERSELF, poor thing, her virtue and her morality. What will you have? It's our lumbering English plan."

"So that her daughter," Mitchy sympathised, "can only, by the arrangement, hope to become at the best her immorality and her vice?"

But Mrs. Brook, without an answer for the question, appeared suddenly to have plunged into a sea of thought. "The only way for Nanda to have been REALLY nice — !"

"Would have been for YOU to be like Jane?"

Mitchy and his hostess seemed for a minute, on this, to gaze together at the tragic truth. Then she shook her head. "We see our mistakes too late." She repeated the movement, but as if to let it all go, and Vanderbank meanwhile, pulling out his watch, had got up with a laugh that showed some inattention and made to Mitchy a remark about their walking away together. Mitchy, engaged for the instant with Mrs. Brook, had assented only with a nod, but the attitude of the two men had become that of departure. Their friend looked at them as if she would like to keep one of them, and for a purpose connected somehow with the other, but was oddly, almost ludicrously, embarrassed to choose. What was in her face indeed during this short passage might prove to have been, should we penetrate, the flicker of a sense that in spite of all intimacy and amiability they could, at bottom and as things commonly turned out, only be united against her. Yet she made at the end a sort of choice in going on to Mitchy: "He hasn't at all told you the real reason of Nanda's idea that you should go in for Aggie."

"Oh I draw the line there," said Vanderbank. "Besides, he understands that too."

Mitchy, on the spot, did himself and every one justice. "Why it just disposes of me, doesn't it?"

It made Vanderbank, restless now and turning about the room, stop with a smile at Mrs. Brook. "We understand too well!"

"Not if he doesn't understand," she replied after a moment while she turned to Mitchy, "that his real 'combination' can in the nature of the case only be — !"

"Oh yes" — Mitchy took her straight up— "with the young thing who is, as you say, positively and helplessly modern and the pious fraud of whose classic identity with a sheet of white paper has been — ah tacitly of course, but none the less practically! — dropped. You've so often reminded me. I do understand. If I were to go in for Aggie it would only be to oblige. The modern girl, the product of our hard London facts

and of her inevitable consciousness of them just as they are — she, wonderful being, IS, I fully recognise, my real affair, and I'm not ashamed to say that when I like the individual I'm not afraid of the type. She knows too much — I don't say; but she doesn't know after all a millionth part of what *I* do."

"I'm not sure!" Mrs. Brook earnestly exclaimed.

He had rung out and he kept it up with a limpidity unusual. "And product for product, when you come to that, I'm a queerer one myself than any other. The traditions *I* smash!" Mitchy laughed.

Mrs. Brook had got up and Vanderbank had gone again to the window. "That's exactly why," she returned. "You're a pair of monsters and your monstrosity fits. She does know too much," she added.

"Well," said Mitchy with resolution, "it's all my fault."

"Not ALL — unless," Mrs. Brook returned, "that's only a sweet way of saying that it's mostly mine."

"Oh yours too — immensely; in fact every one's. Even Edward's, I dare say; and certainly, unmistakably, Harold's. Ah and Van's own — rather!" Mitchy continued; "for all he turns his back and will have nothing to say to it."

It was on the back Vanderbank turned that Mrs. Brook's eyes now rested. "That's precisely why he shouldn't be afraid of her."

He faced straight about. "Oh I don't deny my part."

He shone at them brightly enough, and Mrs. Brook, thoughtful, wistful, candid, took in for a moment the radiance. "And yet to think that after all it has been mere TALK!"

Something in her tone again made her hearers laugh out; so it was still with the air of good humour that Vanderbank answered: "Mere, mere, mere. But perhaps it's exactly the 'mere' that has made us range so wide."

Mrs. Brook's intelligence abounded. "You mean that we haven't had the excuse of passion?"

Her companions once more gave way to mirth, but "There you are!" Vanderbank said after an instant less sociably. With it too he held out his hand.

"You ARE afraid," she answered as she gave him her own; on which, as he made no rejoinder, she held him before her. "Do you mean you REALLY don't know if she gets it?"

"The money, if he DOESN'T go in?" — Mitchy broke almost with an air of responsibility into Vanderbank's silence. "Ah but, as we said, surely — !"

It was Mitchy's eyes that Vanderbank met. "Yes, I should suppose she gets it."

"Perhaps then, as a compensation, she'll even get MORE — !"

"If I don't go in? Oh!" said Vanderbank. And he changed colour.

He was by this time off, but Mrs. Brook kept Mitchy a moment. "Now — by that suggestion — he has something to show. He won't go in."

III

Her visitors had been gone half an hour, but she was still in the drawing-room when Nanda came back. The girl found her, on the sofa, in a posture that might have represented restful oblivion, but that, after a glance, our young lady appeared to interpret as mere intensity of thought. It was a condition from which at all events Mrs. Brook was quickly roused by her daughter's presence: she opened her eyes and put down her feet, so that the two were confronted as closely as persons may be when it is only one of them who looks at the other. Nanda, gazing vaguely about and not seeking a seat, slowly drew off her gloves while her mother's sad eyes considered her from top to toe. "Tea's gone," Mrs. Brook then said as if there were something in the loss peculiarly irretrievable. "But I suppose," she added, "he gave you all you want."

"Oh dear yes, thank you — I've had lots."

Nanda hovered there slim and charming, feathered and ribboned, dressed in thin fresh fabrics and faint colours, with something in the effect of it all to which the sweeter deeper melancholy in her mother's eyes seemed happily to testify. "Just turn round, dear." The girl immediately obeyed, and Mrs. Brook once more took everything in. "The back's best — only she didn't do what she said she would. How they do lie!" she gently quavered.

"Yes, but we lie so to THEM." Nanda had swung round again, producing evidently on her mother's part, by the admirable "hang" of her light skirts, a still deeper peace. "Do you mean the middle fold? — I knew she wouldn't. I don't want my back to be best — I don't walk backward."

"Yes," Mrs. Brook resignedly mused; "you dress for yourself."

"Oh how can you say that," the girl asked, "when I never stick in a pin but what I think of YOU!"

"Well," Mrs. Brook moralised, "one must always, I consider, think, as a sort of point de repere, of some one good person. Only it's best if it's a person one's afraid of. You do very well, but I'm not enough. What one really requires is a kind of salutary terror. I never stick in a pin without thinking of your Cousin Jane. What is it that some one quotes somewhere about some one's having said that 'Our antagonist is our helper — he prevents our being superficial'? The extent to which with my poor clothes the Duchess prevents ME — !" It was a measure Mrs. Brook could give only by the general soft wail of her submission to fate.

"Yes, the Duchess isn't a woman, is she? She's a standard."

The speech had for Nanda's companion, however, no effect of pleasantry or irony, and it was a mark of the special intercourse of these good friends that though they showed each other, in manner and tone, such sustained consideration as might almost have given it the stamp of diplomacy, there was yet in it also something of that economy of expression which is the result of a common experience. The recurrence of opportunity to observe them together would have taught a spectator that — on Mrs. Brook's side doubtless more particularly — their relation was governed by two or three remarkably established and, as might have been said, refined laws, the spirit of which was to guard against the vulgarity so often coming to the surface between parent and child. That they WERE as good friends as if Nanda had not been her daughter was a truth that no passage between them might fail in one way or another to illustrate. Nanda had gathered up, for that matter, early in life, a flower of maternal wisdom: "People talk about conscience, but it seems to me one must just bring it up to a certain point and leave it there. You can let your conscience alone if you're nice to the second housemaid." Mrs. Brook was as "nice" to Nanda as she was to Sarah Curd — which involved, as may easily be imagined, the happiest conditions for Sarah. "Well," she resumed, reverting to the Duchess on a final appraisement of the girl's air, "I really think I do well by you and that Jane wouldn't have anything to say to-day. You look awfully like mamma," she then threw off as if for the first time of mentioning it.

"Oh Cousin Jane doesn't care for that," Nanda returned. "What I don't look like is Aggie, for all I try."

"Ah you shouldn't try — you can do nothing with it. One must be what one is."

Mrs. Brook was almost sententious, but Nanda, with civility, let it pass. "No one in London touches her. She's quite by herself. When one sees her one feels her to be the real thing."

Mrs. Brook, without harshness, wondered. "What do you mean by the real thing?"

Even Nanda, however, had to think a moment.

"Well, the real young one. That's what Lord Petherton calls her," she mildly joked—"'the young 'un'"

Her mother's echo was not for the joke, but for something else. "I know what you mean. What's the use of being good?"

"Oh I didn't mean that," said Nanda. "Besides, isn't Aggie of a goodness — ?"

"I wasn't talking of her. I was asking myself what's the use of MY being."

"Well, you can't help it any more than the Duchess can help — !"

"Ah but she could if she would!" Mrs. Brook broke in with a sharper ring than she had yet given. "We can't help being good perhaps, if that burden's laid on us — but there are lengths in other directions we're not absolutely obliged to go. And what I think of when I stick in the pins," she went on, "is that Jane seems to me really never to have had to pay." She appeared for a minute to brood on this till she could no longer bear it; after which she jerked out: "Why she has never had to pay for ANYthing!"

Nanda had by this time seated herself, taking her place, under the interest of their talk, on her mother's sofa, where, except for the removal of her long soft gloves, which one of her hands again and again drew caressingly through the other, she remained very much as if she were some friendly yet circumspect young visitor to whom Mrs. Brook had on some occasion dropped "DO come." But there was something perhaps more expressly conciliatory in the way she had kept everything on: as if, in particular serenity and to confirm kindly Mrs. Brook's sense of what had been done for her, she had neither taken off her great feathered hat nor laid down her parasol of pale green silk, the "match" of hat and ribbons and which had an expensive precious knob. Our spectator would possibly have found too much earnestness in her face to be sure if there was also candour. "And do you mean that YOU have had to pay — ?"

"Oh yes — all the while." With this Mrs. Brook was a little short, and also as she added as if to banish a slight awkwardness: "But don't let it discourage you."

Nanda seemed an instant to weigh the advice, and the whole thing would have been striking as another touch in the picture of the odd want, on the part of each, of any sense of levity in the other. Whatever escape, face to face, mother or daughter might ever seek would never be the humorous one — a circumstance, notwithstanding, that would not in every case have failed to make their interviews droll for a third person. It would always indeed for such a person have produced an impression of tension beneath the surface. "I could have done much better at the start and have lost less time," the girl at last said, "if I hadn't had the drawback of not really remembering Granny."

"Oh well, *I* remember her!" Mrs. Brook moaned with an accent that evidently struck her the next moment as so much out of place that she slightly deflected. She took Nanda's parasol and held it as if — a more delicate thing much than any one of hers — she simply liked to have it. "Her clothes — at your age at least — must have been hideous. Was it at the place he took you to that he gave you tea?" she then went on.

"Yes, at the Museum. We had an orgy in the refreshment-room. But he took me afterwards to Tishy's, where we had another."

"He went IN with you?" Mrs. Brook had suddenly flashed into eagerness.

"Oh yes — I made him."

"He didn't want to?"

"On the contrary — very much. But he doesn't do everything he wants," said Nanda.

Mrs. Brook seemed to wonder. "You mean you've also to want it?"

"Oh no — THAT isn't enough. What I suppose I mean," Nanda continued, "is that he doesn't do anything he doesn't want. But he does quite enough," she added.

"And who then was at Tishy's?"

"Oh poor old Tish herself, naturally, and Carrie Donner."

"And no one else?"

The girl just waited. "Yes, Mr. Cashmore came in."

Her mother gave a groan of impatience. "Ah AGAIN?"

Nanda thought an instant. "How do you mean, 'again'? He just lives there as much as he ever did, and Tishy can't prevent him."

"I was thinking of Mr. Longdon — of THEIR meeting. When he met him here that time he liked it so little. Did he like it any more to-day?" Mrs. Brook quavered.

"Oh no, he hated it."

"But hadn't he — if he should go in — known he WOULD?"

"Yes, perfectly. But he wanted to see."

"To see — ?" Mrs. Brook just threw out.

"Well, where I go so much. And he knew I wished it."

“I don’t quite see why,” Mrs. Brook mildly observed. And then as her daughter said nothing to help her: “At any rate he did loathe it?”

Nanda, for a reply, simply after an instant put a question. “Well, how can he understand?”

“You mean, like me, why you do go there so much? How can he indeed?”

“I don’t mean that,” the girl returned— “it’s just that he understands perfectly, because he saw them all, in such an extraordinary way — well, what can I ever call it? — clutch me and cling to me.”

Mrs. Brook, with full gravity, considered this picture. “And was Mr. Cashmore to-day so ridiculous?”

“Ah he’s not ridiculous, mamma — he’s very unhappy. He thinks now Lady Fanny probably won’t go, but he feels that may be after all only the worse for him.”

“She WILL go,” Mrs. Brook answered with one of her roundabout approaches to decision. “He IS too great an idiot. She was here an hour ago, and if ever a woman was packed — !”

“Well,” Nanda objected, “but doesn’t she spend her time in packing and unpacking?”

This enquiry, however, scarce pulled up her mother. “No — though she HAS, no doubt, hitherto wasted plenty of labour. She has now a dozen boxes — I could see them there in her wonderful eyes — just waiting to be called for. So if you’re counting on her not going, my dear — !” Mrs. Brook gave a head-shake that was the warning of wisdom.

“Oh I don’t care what she does!” Nanda replied. “What I meant just now was that Mr. Longdon couldn’t understand why, with so much to make them so, they couldn’t be decently happy.”

“And did he wish you to explain?”

“I tried to, but I didn’t make it any better. He doesn’t like them. He doesn’t even care for Tish.”

“He told you so — right out?”

“Oh,” Nanda said, “of course I asked him. I didn’t press him, because I never do — !”

“You never do?” Mrs. Brook broke in as with the glimpse of a new light.

The girl showed an indulgence for this interest that was for a moment almost elderly. “I enjoy awfully with him seeing just how to take him.”

Her tone and her face evidently put forth for her companion at this juncture something freshly, even quite supremely suggestive; and yet the effect of them on Mrs. Brook’s part was only a question so off-hand that it might already often have been asked. The mother’s eyes, to ask it, we may none the less add, attached themselves closely to the daughter’s, and her face just glowed. “You like him so very awfully?”

It was as if the next instant Nanda felt herself on her guard. Yet she spoke with a certain surrender. “Well, it’s rather intoxicating to be one’s self — !” She had only a drop over the choice of her term.

“So tremendously made up to, you mean — even by a little fussy ancient man? But DOESN’T he, my dear,” Mrs. Brook continued with encouragement, “make up to you?”

A supposititious spectator would certainly on this have imagined in the girl’s face the delicate dawn of a sense that her mother had suddenly become vulgar, together with a general consciousness that the way to meet vulgarity was always to be frank and simple and above all to ignore. “He makes one enjoy being liked so much — liked better, I do think, than I’ve ever been liked by any one.”

If Mrs. Brook hesitated it was, however, clearly not because she had noticed. “Not better surely than by dear Mitchy? Or even if you come to that by Tishy herself.”

Nanda’s simplicity maintained itself. “Oh Mr. Longdon’s different from Tishy.”

Her mother again hesitated. “You mean of course he knows more?”

The girl considered it. “He doesn’t know MORE. But he knows other things. And he’s pleasanter than Mitchy.”

“You mean because he doesn’t want to marry you?”

It was as if she had not heard that Nanda continued: “Well, he’s more beautiful.”

“O-oh!” cried Mrs. Brook, with a drawn-out extravagance of comment that amounted to an impugnment of her taste even by herself.

It contributed to Nanda’s quietness. “He’s one of the most beautiful people in the world.”

Her companion at this, with a quick wonder, fixed her. “DOES he, my dear, want to marry you?”

“Yes — to all sorts of ridiculous people.”

“But I mean — would you take HIM?”

Nanda, rising, met the question with a short ironic “Yes!” that showed her first impatience. “It’s so charming being liked without being approved.”

But Mrs. Brook only wanted to know. “He doesn’t approve — ?”

“No, but it makes no difference. It’s all exactly right — it doesn’t matter.”

Mrs. Brook seemed to wonder, however, exactly how these things could be. “He doesn’t want you to give up anything?” She looked as if swiftly thinking what Nanda MIGHT give up.

“Oh yes, everything.”

It was as if for an instant she found her daughter inscrutable; then she had a strange smile. “Me?”

The girl was perfectly prompt. “Everything. But he wouldn’t like me nearly so much if I really did.”

Her mother had a further pause. “Does he want to ADOPT you?” Then more quickly and sadly, though also a little as if lacking nerve to push the research: “We couldn’t give you up, Nanda.”

“Thank you so much, mamma. But we shan’t be very much tried,” Nanda said, “because what it comes to seems to be that I’m really what you may call adopting HIM. I mean I’m little by little changing him — gradually showing him that, as I couldn’t possibly have been different, and as also of course one can’t keep giving up, the only way is for him not to mind, and to take me just as I am. That, don’t you see? is what he would never have expected to do.”

Mrs. Brook recognised in a manner the explanation, but still had her wistfulness. “But — a — to take you, ‘as you are,’ WHERE?”

“Well, to the South Kensington Museum.”

“Oh!” said Mrs. Brook. Then, however, in a more exemplary tone: “Do you enjoy so very much your long hours with him?”

Nanda appeared for an instant to think how to express it. “Well, we’re great friends.”

“And always talking about Granny?”

“Oh no — really almost never now.”

“He doesn’t think so awfully much of her?” There was an oddity of eagerness in the question — a hope, a kind of dash, for something that might have been in Nanda’s interest.

The girl met these things only with obliging gravity. “I think he’s losing any sense of my likeness. He’s too used to it — or too many things that are too different now cover it up.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Brook as she took this in, “I think it’s awfully clever of you to get only the good of him and have none of the worry.”

Nanda wondered. “The worry?”

“You leave that all to ME,” her mother went on, but quite forgivingly. “I hope at any rate that the good, for you, will be real.”

“Real?” the girl, remaining vague, again echoed.

Mrs. Brook showed for this not perhaps an irritation, but a flicker of austerity. “You must remember we’ve a great many things to think about. There are things we must take for granted in each other — we must all help in our way to pull the coach. That’s what I mean by worry, and if you don’t have any so much the better for you. For me it’s in the day’s work. Your father and I have most to think about always at this time, as you perfectly know — when we have to turn things round and manage somehow or other to get out of town, have to provide and pinch, to meet all the necessities, with money, money, money at every turn running away like water. The children this year seem to fit into nothing, into nowhere, and Harold’s more dreadful than he has ever been, doing nothing at all for himself and requiring everything to be done for him. He talks about his American girl, with millions, who’s so awfully taken with him, but I can’t find out anything about her: the only one, just now, that people seem to have heard of is the one Booby Manger’s engaged to. The Mangers literally snap up everything,” Mrs. Brook quite wailingly now continued: “the Jew man, so gigantically rich — who is he? Baron Schack or Schmack — who has just taken Cumberland House and who has the awful stammer — or what is it? no roof to his mouth — is to give that horrid little Algie, to do his conversation for him, four hundred a year, which Harold pretended to me that, of all the rush of young men — dozens! — HE was most in the running for. Your father’s settled gloom is terrible, and I bear all the brunt of it; we get literally nothing this year for the Hovel, yet have to spend on it heaven knows what; and everybody, for the next three months, in Scotland and everywhere, has asked us for the wrong time and nobody for the right: so that I assure you I don’t know where to turn — which doesn’t however in the least prevent every one coming to me with their own selfish troubles.” It was as if Mrs. Brook had found the cup of her secret sorrows suddenly jostled by some touch of which the perversity, though not completely noted at the moment, proved, as she a little let herself go, sufficient to make it flow over; but she drew, the next thing, from her daughter’s

stillness a reflexion of the vanity of such heat and speedily recovered herself as if in order with more dignity to point the moral. “I can carry my burden and shall do so to the end; but we must each remember that we shall fall to pieces if we don’t manage to keep hold of some little idea of responsibility. I positively can’t arrange without knowing when it is you go to him.”

“To Mr. Longdon? Oh whenever I like,” Nanda replied very gently and simply.

“And when shall you be so good as to like?”

“Well, he goes himself on Saturday, and if I want I can go a few days later.”

“And what day can you go if I want?” Mrs. Brook spoke as with a small sharpness — just softened indeed in time — produced by the sight of a freedom in her daughter’s life that suddenly loomed larger than any freedom of her own. It was still a part of the unsteadiness of the vessel of her anxieties; but she never after all remained publicly long subject to the influence she often comprehensively designated to others as well as to herself as “nastiness.” “What I mean is that you might go the same day, mightn’t you?”

“With him — in the train? I should think so if you wish it.”

“But would HE wish it? I mean would he hate it?”

“I don’t think so at all, but I can easily ask him.”

Mrs. Brook’s head inclined to the chimney and her eyes to the window. “Easily?”

Nanda looked for a moment mystified by her mother’s insistence. “I can at any rate perfectly try it.”

“Remembering even that mamma would never have pushed so?”

Nanda’s face seemed to concede even that condition. “Well,” she at all events serenely replied, “I really think we’re good friends enough for anything.”

It might have been, for the light it quickly produced, exactly what her mother had been working to make her say. “What do you call that then, I should like to know, but his adopting you?”

“Ah I don’t know that it matters much what it’s called.”

“So long as it brings with it, you mean,” Mrs. Brook asked, “all the advantages?”

“Well yes,” said Nanda, who had now begun dimly to smile— “call them advantages.”

Mrs. Brook had a pause. “One would be quite ready to do that if one only knew a little more exactly what they’re to consist of.”

“Oh the great advantage, I feel, is doing something for HIM.”

Nanda’s companion, at this, hesitated afresh. “But doesn’t that, my dear, put the extravagance of your surrender to him on rather an odd footing? Charity, love, begins at home, and if it’s a question of merely GIVING, you’ve objects enough for your bounty without going so far.”

The girl, as her stare showed, was held a moment by her surprise, which presently broke out. “Why, I thought you wanted me so to be nice to him!”

“Well, I hope you won’t think me very vulgar,” said Mrs. Brook, “if I tell you that I want you still more to have some idea of what you’ll get by it. I’ve no wish,” she added, “to keep on boring you with Mitchy—”

“Don’t, don’t!” Nanda pleaded.

Her mother stopped as short as if there had been something in her tone to set the limit the more utterly for being unstudied. Yet poor Mrs. Brook couldn’t leave it there. “Then what do you get instead?”

“Instead of Mitchy? Oh,” said Nanda, “I shall never marry.”

Mrs. Brook at this turned away, moving over to the window with quickened weariness. Nanda, on her side, as if their talk had ended, went across to the sofa to take up her parasol before leaving the room, an impulse rather favoured than arrested by the arrival of her brother Harold, who came in at the moment both his relatives had turned a back to the door and who gave his sister, as she faced him, a greeting that made their mother look round. “Hallo, Nan — you ARE lovely! Ain’t she lovely, mother?”

“No!” Mrs. Brook answered, not, however, otherwise noticing him. Her domestic despair centred at this instant all in her daughter. “Well then, we shall consider — your father and I — that he must take the consequence.”

Nanda had now her hand on the door, while Harold had dropped on the sofa. “‘He’?” she just sounded.

“I mean Mr. Longdon.”

“And what do you mean by the consequence?”

“Well, it will do for the beginning of it that you’ll please go down WITH him.”

“On Saturday then? Thanks, mamma,” the girl returned.

She was instantly gone, on which Mrs. Brook had more attention for her son. This, after an instant, as she

approached the sofa and raised her eyes from the little table beside it, came straight out. “Where in the world is that five-pound note?”

Harold looked vacantly about him. “What five-pound note?”

BOOK SEVENTH. MITCHY

Mr. Longdon's garden took in three acres and, full of charming features, had for its greatest wonder the extent and colour of its old brick wall, in which the pink and purple surface was the fruit of the mild ages and the protective function, for a visitor strolling, sitting, talking, reading, that of a nurse of reverie. The air of the place, in the August time, thrilled all the while with the bliss of birds, the hum of little lives unseen and the flicker of white butterflies. It was on the large flat enclosed lawn that Nanda spoke to Vanderbank of the three weeks she would have completed there on the morrow — weeks that had been — she made no secret of it — the happiest she had yet spent anywhere. The greyish day was soft and still and the sky faintly marbled, while the more newly arrived of the visitors from London, who had come late on the Friday afternoon, lounged away the morning in an attitude every relaxed line of which referred to the holiday he had, as it were — at first merely looking about and victualling — sat down in front of as a captain before a city. There were sitting-places, just there, out of the full light, cushioned benches in the thick wide spread of old mulberry-boughs. A large book of facts lay in the young man's lap, and Nanda had come out to him, half an hour before luncheon, somewhat as Beatrice came out to Benedick: not to call him immediately indeed to the meal, but mentioning promptly that she had come at a bidding. Mr. Longdon had rebuked her, it appeared, for her want of attention to their guest, showing her in this way, to her pleasure, how far he had gone toward taking her, as he called it, into the house.

"You've been thinking of yourself," Vanderbank asked, "as a mere clerk at a salary, and you now find that you're a partner and have a share in the concern?"

"It seems to be something like that. But doesn't a partner put in something? What have I put in?"

"Well — ME, for one thing. Isn't it your being here that has brought me down?"

"Do you mean you wouldn't have come for him alone? Then don't you make anything of his attraction? You ought to," said Nanda, "when he likes you so."

Vanderbank, longing for a river, was in white flannels, and he took her question with a happy laugh, a handsome face of good humour that completed the effect of his long, cool fairness. "Do you mind my just sitting still, do you mind letting me smoke and staying with me a while? Perhaps after a little we'll walk about — shan't we? But face to face with this dear old house, in this jolly old nook, one's too contented to move, lest raising a finger even should break the spell. What WILL be perfect will be your just sitting down — DO sit down — and scolding me a little. That, my dear Nanda, will deepen the peace." Some minutes later, while, near him but in another chair, she fingered the impossible book, as she pronounced it, that she had taken from him, he came back to what she had last said. "Has he talked to you much about his 'liking' me?"

Nanda waited a minute, turning over the book. "No."

"Then how are you just now so struck with it?"

"I'm not struck only with what I'm talked to about. I don't know," she went on, "only what people tell me."

"Ah no — you're too much your mother's daughter for that!" Vanderbank leaned back and smoked, and though all his air seemed to say that when one was so at ease for gossip almost any subject would do, he kept jogging his foot with the same small nervous motion as during the half-hour at Mertle that this record has commemorated. "You're too much one of us all," he continued. "We've tremendous perceptions," he laughed. "Of course I SHOULD have come for him. But after all," he added, as if all sorts of nonsense would equally serve, "he mightn't, except for you, you know, have asked me."

Nanda so far accepted this view as to reply: "That's awfully weak. He's so modest that he might have been afraid of your boring yourself."

"That's just what I mean."

"Well, if you do," Nanda returned, "the explanation's a little conceited."

"Oh I only made it," Vanderbank said, "in reference to his modesty." Beyond the lawn the house was before him, old, square, red-roofed, well assured of its right to the place it took up in the world. This was a considerable space — in the little world at least of Suffolk — and the look of possession had everywhere mixed with it, in the form of old windows and doors, the tone of old red surfaces, the style of old white facings, the age of old high creepers, the long confirmation of time. Suggestive of panelled rooms, of precious

mahogany, of portraits of women dead, of coloured china glimmering through glass doors and delicate silver reflected on bared tables, the thing was one of those impressions of a particular period that it takes two centuries to produce. "Fancy," the young man incoherently exclaimed, "his caring to leave anything so loveable as all this to come up and live with US!"

The girl also for a little lost herself. "Oh you don't know what it is — the charm comes out so as one stays. Little by little it grows and grows. There are old things everywhere that are too delightful. He lets me explore so — he lets me rummage and rifle. Every day I make discoveries."

Vanderbank wondered as he smoked. "You mean he lets you take things — ?"

"Oh yes — up to my room, to study or to copy. There are old patterns that are too dear for anything. It's when you live with them, you see, that you know. Everything in the place is such good company."

"Your mother ought to be here," Vanderbank presently suggested. "She's so fond of good company." Then as Nanda answered nothing he went on: "Was your grandmother ever?"

"Never," the girl promptly said. "Never," she repeated in a tone quite different. After which she added: "I'm the only one."

"Oh, and I 'me and you,' as they say," her companion amended.

"Yes, and Mr. Mitchy, who's to come down — please don't forget — this afternoon."

Vanderbank had another of his contemplative pauses. "Thank you for reminding me. I shall spread myself as much as possible before he comes — try to produce so much of my effect that I shall be safe. But what did Mr. Longdon ask him for?"

"Ah," said Nanda gaily, "what did he ask YOU for?"

"Why, for the reason you just now mentioned — that his interest in me is so uncontrollable."

"Then isn't his interest in Mitchy—"

"Of the same general order?" Vanderbank broke in. "Not in the least." He seemed to look for a way to express the distinction — which suddenly occurred to him. "He wasn't in love with Mitchy's mother."

"No" — Nanda turned it over. "Mitchy's mother, it appears, was awful. Mr. Cashmore knew her."

Vanderbank's smoke-puffs were profuse and his pauses frequent. "Awful to Mr. Cashmore? I'm glad to hear it — he must have deserved it. But I believe in her all the same. Mitchy's often awful himself," the young man rambled on. "Just so I believe in HIM."

"So do I," said Nanda— "and that's why I asked him."

"YOU asked him, my dear child? Have you the inviting?"

"Oh yes."

The eyes he turned on her seemed really to try if she jested or were serious. "So you arranged for me too?"

She turned over again a few leaves of his book and, closing it with something of a clap, transferred it to the bench beside him — a movement in which, as if through a drop into thought, he rendered her no assistance. "What I mean is that I proposed it to Mr. Longdon, I suggested he should be asked. I've a reason for seeing him — I want to talk to him. And do you know," the girl went on, "what Mr. Longdon said?"

"Something splendid of course."

"He asked if you wouldn't perhaps dislike his being here with you."

Vanderbank, throwing back his head, laughed, smoked, jogged his foot more than ever. "Awfully nice. Dear old Mitch! How little afraid of him you are!"

Nanda wondered. "Of Mitch?"

"Yes, of the tremendous pull he really has. It's all very well to talk — he HAS it. But of course I don't mean I don't know" — and as with the effect of his nervous sociability he shifted his position. "I perfectly see that you're NOT afraid. I perfectly know what you have in your head. I should never in the least dream of accusing you — as far as HE is concerned — of the least disposition to flirt; any more indeed," Vanderbank pleasantly pursued, "than even of any general tendency of that sort. No, my dear Nanda" — he kindly kept it up— "I WILL say for you that, though a girl, thank heaven, and awfully MUCH a girl, you're really not on the whole more of a flirt than a respectable social ideal prescribes."

"Thank you most tremendously," his companion quietly replied.

Something in the tone of it made him laugh out, and the particular sound went well with all the rest, with the August day and the charming spot and the young man's lounging figure and Nanda's own little hovering hospitality. "Of course I strike you as patronising you with unconscious sublimity. Well, that's all right, for what's the most natural thing to do in these conditions but the most luxurious? Won't Mitchy be wonderful

for feeling and enjoying them? I assure you I'm delighted he's coming." Then in a different tone a moment later, "Do you expect to be here long?" he asked.

It took Nanda some time to say. "As long as Mr. Longdon will keep me, I suppose — if that doesn't sound very horrible."

"Oh he'll keep you! Only won't he himself," Vanderbank went on, "be coming up to town in the course of the autumn?"

"Well, in that case I'd perfectly stay here without him."

"And leave him in London without YOU? Ah that's not what we want: he wouldn't be at all the same thing without you. Least of all for himself!" Vanderbank declared.

Nanda again thought. "Yes, that's what makes him funny, I suppose — his curious infatuation. I set him off — what do you call it? — show him off: by his going round and round me as the acrobat on the horse in the circus goes round the clown. He has said a great deal to me of your mother," she irrelevantly added.

"Ok everything that's kind of course, or you wouldn't mention it."

"That's what I mean," said Nanda.

"I see, I see — most charming of him." Vanderbank kept his high head thrown back as for the view, with a bright equal general interest, of everything that was before them, whether talked of or seen. "Who do you think I yesterday had a letter from? An extraordinary funny one from Harold. He gave me all the family news."

"And what IS the family news?" the girl after a minute enquired.

"Well, the first great item is that he himself—"

"Wanted," Nanda broke in, "to borrow five pounds of you? I say that," she added, "because if he wrote to you—"

"It couldn't have been in such a case for the simple pleasure of the intercourse?" Vanderbank hesitated, but continued not to look at her. "What do you know, pray, of poor Harold's borrowings?"

"Oh I know as I know other things. Don't I know everything?"

"DO you? I should rather ask," the young man gaily enough replied.

"Why should I not? How should I not? You know what I know." Then as to explain herself and attenuate a little the sudden emphasis with which she had spoken: "I remember your once telling me that I must take in things at my pores."

Her companion stared, but with his laugh again changed his posture. "That you' must — ?"

"That I do — and you were quite right."

"And when did I make this extraordinary charge?"

"Ah then," said Nanda, "you admit it IS a charge. It was a long time ago — when I was a little girl. Which made it worse!" she dropped.

It made it at all events now for Vanderbank more amusing. "Ah not worse — better!"

She thought a moment. "Because in that case I mightn't have understood? But that I do understand is just what you've always meant."

"'Always,' my dear Nanda? I feel somehow," he rejoined very kindly, "as if you overwhelmed me!"

"You 'feel' as if I did — but the reality is just that I don't. The day I overwhelm you, Mr. Van — !" She let that pass, however; there was too much to say about it and there was something else much simpler. "Girls understand now. It has got to be faced, as Tishy says."

"Oh well," Vanderbank laughed, "we don't require Tishy to point that out to us. What are we all doing most of the time but trying to face it?"

"Doing? Aren't you doing rather something very different? You're just trying to dodge it. You're trying to make believe — not perhaps to yourselves but to US — that it isn't so."

"But surely you don't want us to be any worse!"

She shook her head with brisk gravity. "We don't care really what you are."

His amusement now dropped to her straighter. "Your 'we' is awfully beautiful. It's charming to hear you speak for the whole lovely lot. Only you speak, you know, as if you were just the class apart that you yet complain of our — by our scruples — implying you to be."

She considered this objection with her eyes on his face. "Well then we do care. Only — !"

"Only it's a big subject."

"Oh yes — no doubt; it's a big subject." She appeared to wish to meet him on everything reasonable.

“Even Mr. Longdon admits that.”

Vanderbank wondered. “You mean you talk over with him — !”

“The subject of girls? Why we scarcely discuss anything else.”

“Oh no wonder then you’re not bored. But you mean,” he asked, “that he recognises the inevitable change — ?”

“He can’t shut his eyes to the facts. He sees we’re quite a different thing.”

“I dare say” — her friend was fully appreciative. “Yet the old thing — what do YOU know of it?”

“I personally? Well, I’ve seen some change even in MY short life. And aren’t the old books full of us? Then Mr. Longdon himself has told me.”

Vanderbank smoked and smoked. “You’ve gone into it with him?”

“As far as a man and a woman can together.”

As he took her in at this with a turn of his eye he might have had in his ears the echo of all the times it had been dropped in Buckingham Crescent that Nanda was “wonderful.” She WAS indeed. “Oh he’s of course on certain sides shy.”

“Awfully — too beautifully. And then there’s Aggie,” the girl pursued. “I mean for the real old thing.”

“Yes, no doubt — if she BE the real old thing. But what the deuce really IS Aggie?”

“Well,” said Nanda with the frankest interest, “she’s a miracle. If one could be her exactly, absolutely, without the least little mite of change, one would probably be wise to close with it. Otherwise — except for anything BUT that — I’d rather brazen it out as myself.”

There fell between them on this a silence of some minutes, after which it would probably not have been possible for either to say if their eyes had met while it lasted. This was at any rate not the case as Vanderbank at last remarked: “Your brass, my dear young lady, is pure gold!”

“Then it’s of me, I think, that Harold ought to borrow.”

“You mean therefore that mine isn’t?” Vanderbank went on.

“Well, you really haven’t any natural ‘cheek’ — not like SOME of them. You’re in yourself as uneasy, if anything’s said and every one giggles or makes some face, as Mr. Longdon, and if Lord Petherton hadn’t once told me that a man hates almost as much to be called modest as a woman does, I’d say that very often in London now you must pass some bad moments.”

The present might precisely have been one of them, we should doubtless have gathered, had we seen fully recorded in Vanderbank’s face the degree to which this prompt response embarrassed or at least stupefied him. But he could always provisionally laugh. “I like your ‘in London now’!”

“It’s the tone and the current and the effect of all the others that push you along,” she went on as if she hadn’t heard him. “If such things are contagious, as every one says, you prove it perhaps as much as any one. But you don’t begin” — she continued blandly enough to work it out for him; “or you can’t at least originally have begun. Any one would know that now — from the terrific effect I see I produce on you — by talking this way. There it is — it’s all out before one knows it, isn’t it, and I can’t help it any more than you can, can I?” So she appeared to put it to him, with something in her lucidity that would have been infinitely touching; a strange grave calm consciousness of their common doom and of what in especial in it would be worst for herself. He sprang up indeed after an instant as if he had been infinitely touched; he turned away, taking just near her a few steps to and fro, gazed about the place again, but this time without the air of particularly seeing it, and then came back to her as if from a greater distance. An observer at all initiated would, at the juncture, fairly have hung on his lips, and there was in fact on Vanderbank’s part quite the look of the man — though it lasted but just while we seize it — in suspense about himself. The most initiated observer of all would have been poor Mr. Longdon, in that case destined, however, to be also the most defeated, with the sign of his tension a smothered “Ah if he doesn’t do it NOW!” Well, Vanderbank didn’t do it “now,” and the odd slow irrelevant sigh he gave out might have sufficed as the record of his recovery from a peril lasting just long enough to be measured. Had there been any measure of it meanwhile for Nanda? There was nothing at least to show either the presence or the relief of anxiety in the way in which, by a prompt transition, she left her last appeal to him simply to take care of itself. “You haven’t denied that Harold does borrow.”

He gave a sound as of cheer for this luckily firmer ground. “My dear child, I never lent the silly boy five pounds in my life. In fact I like the way you talk of that. I don’t know quite for what you take me, but the number of persons to whom I HAVE lent five pounds — !”

“Is so awfully small” — she took him up on it— “as not to look so very well for you?” She held him an

instant as with the fine intelligence of his meaning in this, and then, though not with sharpness, broke out: “Why are you trying to make out that you’re nasty and stingy? Why do you misrepresent — ?”

“My natural generosity? I don’t misrepresent anything, but I take, I think, rather markedly good care of money.” She had remained in her place and he was before her on the grass, his hands in his pockets and his manner perhaps a little awkward. “The way you young things talk of it!”

“Harold talks of it — but I don’t think *I* do. I’m not a bit expensive — ask mother, or even ask father. I do with awfully little — for clothes and things, and I could easily do with still less. Harold’s a born consumer, as Mitchy says; he says also he’s one of those people who will never really want.”

“Ah for that, Mitchy himself will never let him.”

“Well then, with every one helping us all round, aren’t we a lovely family? I don’t speak of it to tell tales, but when you mention hearing from Harold all sorts of things immediately come over me. We seem to be all living more or less on other people, all immensely ‘beholden.’ You can easily say of course that I’m worst of all. The children and their people, at Bognor, are in borrowed quarters — mother got them lent her — as to which, no doubt, I’m perfectly aware that I ought to be there sharing them, taking care of my little brother and sister, instead of sitting here at Mr. Longdon’s expense to expose everything and criticise. Father and mother, in Scotland, are on a grand campaign. Well” — she pulled herself up— “I’m not in THAT at any rate. Say you’ve lent Harold only five shillings,” she went on.

Vanderbank stood smiling. “Well, say I have. I never lend any one whatever more.”

“It only adds to my conviction,” Nanda explained, “that he writes to Mr. Longdon.”

“But if Mr. Longdon doesn’t say so — ?” Vanderbank objected.

“Oh that proves nothing.” She got up as she spoke. “Harold also works Granny.” He only laughed out at first for this, while she went on: “You’ll think I make myself out fearfully deep — I mean in the way of knowing everything without having to be told. That IS, as you say, mamma’s great accomplishment, so it must be hereditary. Besides, there seem to me only too many things one IS told. Only Mr. Longdon has in fact said nothing.”

She had looked about responsibly — not to leave in disorder the garden-nook they had occupied; picking up a newspaper and changing the place of a cushion. “I do think that with him you’re remarkable,” Vanderbank observed— “putting on one side all you seem to know and on the other all he holds his tongue about. What then DOES he say?” the young man asked after a slight pause and perhaps even with a slight irritation.

Nanda glanced round again — she was folding, rather carefully, her paper. Presently her glance met their friend, who, having come out of one of the long windows that opened to the lawn, had stopped there to watch them. “He says just now that luncheon’s ready.”

II

"I've made him," she said in the drawing-room to Mitchy, "make Mr. Van go with him."

Mr. Longdon, in the rain, which had come on since the morning, had betaken himself to church, and his other guest, with sufficiently marked good humour, had borne him company. The windows of the drawing-room looked at the wet garden, all vivid and rich in the summer shower, and Mitchy, after seeing Vanderbank turn up his trousers and fling back a last answer to the not quite sincere chaff his submission had engendered, adopted freely and familiarly the prospect not only of a grateful freshened lawn, but of a good hour in the very pick, as he called it, of his actual happy conditions. The favouring rain, the dear old place, the charming serious house, the large inimitable room, the absence of the others, the present vision of what his young friend had given him to count on — the sense of these delights was expressed in his fixed generous glare. He was at first too pleased even to sit down; he measured the great space from end to end, admiring again everything he had admired before and protesting afresh that no modern ingenuity — not even his own, to which he did justice — could create effects of such purity. The final touch in the picture before them was just the composer's ignorance. Mr. Longdon had not made his house, he had simply lived it, and the "taste" of the place — Mitchy in certain connexions abominated the word — was just nothing more than the beauty of his life. Everything on every side had dropped straight from heaven, with nowhere a bargaining thumb-mark, a single sign of the shop. All this would have been a wonderful theme for discourse in Buckingham Crescent — so happy an exercise for the votaries of that temple of analysis that he repeatedly spoke of their experience of it as crying aloud for Mrs. Brook. The questions it set in motion for the perceptive mind were exactly those that, as he said, most made them feel themselves. Vanderbank's plea for his morning had been a pile of letters to work off, and Mitchy — then coming down, as he announced from the first, ready for anything — had gone to church with Mr. Longdon and Nanda in the finest spirit of curiosity. He now — after the girl's remark — turned away from his view of the rain, which he found different somehow from other rain, as everything else was different, and replied that he knew well enough what she could make Mr. Longdon do, but only wondered at Mr. Longdon's secret for acting on their friend. He was there before her with his hands in his pockets and appreciation winking from every yellow spot in his red necktie. "Afternoon service of a wet Sunday in a small country town is a large order. Does Van do everything the governor wants?"

"He may perhaps have had a suspicion of what I want," Nanda explained. "If I want particularly to talk to you — !"

"He has got out of the way to give me a chance? Well then he's as usual simply magnificent. How can I express the bliss of finding myself enclosed with you in this sweet old security, this really unimagined sanctity? Nothing's more charming than suddenly to come across something sharp and fresh after we've thought there was nothing more that could draw from us a groan. We've supposed we've had it all, have squeezed the last impression out of the last disappointment, penetrated to the last familiarity in the last surprise; then some fine day we find that we haven't done justice to life. There are little things that pop up and make us feel again. What MAY happen is after all incalculable. There's just a little chuck of the dice, and for three minutes we win. These, my dear young lady, are my three minutes. You wouldn't believe the amusement I get from them, and how can I possibly tell you? There's a faint divine old fragrance here in the room — or doesn't it perhaps reach you? I shan't have lived without it, but I see now I had been afraid I should. You, on your side, won't have lived without some touch of greatness. This moment's great and you've produced it. You were great when you felt all you COULD produce. Therefore," Mitchy went on, pausing once more, as he walked, before a picture, "I won't pull the whole thing down by the vulgarity of wishing I too only had a first-rate Cotman."

"Have you given up some VERY big thing to come?" Nanda replied to this.

"What in the world is very big, my child, but the beauty of this hour? I haven't the least idea WHAT, when I got Mr. Longdon's note, I gave up. Don't ask me for an account of anything; everything went — became imperceptible. I WILL say that for myself: I shed my badness, I do forget people, with a facility that makes me, for bits, for little patches, so far as they're concerned, cease to BE; so that my life is spotted all over with momentary states in which I'm as the dead of whom nothing's said but good." He had strolled toward her again while she smiled at him. "I've died for this, Nanda."

"The only difficulty I see," she presently replied, "is that you ought to marry a woman really clever and

that I'm not quite sure what there may be of that in Aggie."

"In Aggie?" her friend echoed very gently. "Is THAT what you've sent for me for — to talk about Aggie?"

"Didn't it occur to you it might be?"

"That it couldn't possibly, you mean, be anything else?" He looked about for the place in which it would express the deepest surrender to the scene to sit — then sank down with a beautiful prompt submission. "I've no idea of what occurred to me — nothing at least but the sense that I had occurred to YOU. The occurrence is clay in the hands of the potter. Do with me what you will."

"You appreciate everything so wonderfully," Nanda said, "that it oughtn't to be hard for you to appreciate HER. I do dream so you may save her. That's why I haven't waited."

"The only thing that remains to me in life," he answered, "is a certain accessibility to the thought of what I may still do to figure a little in your eye; but that's precisely a thought you may assist to become clearer. You may for instance give me some pledge or sign that if I do figure — prance and caracole and sufficiently kick up the dust — your eye won't suffer itself to be distracted from me. I think there's no adventure I'm not ready to undertake for you; yet my passion — chastened, through all this, purified, austere — is still enough of this world not wholly to have renounced the fancy of some small reward."

"How small?" the girl asked.

She spoke as if feeling she must take from him in common kindness at least as much as she would make him take, and the serious anxious patience such a consciousness gave her tone was met by Mitchy with a charmed reasonableness that his habit of hyperbole did nothing to misrepresent. He glowed at her with the fullest recognition that there was something he was there to discuss with her, but with the assurance in every soft sound of him that no height to which she might lift the discussion would be too great for him to reach. His every cadence and every motion was an implication, as from one to the other, of the exquisite. Oh he could sustain it! "Well, I mean the establishment of something between us. I mean your arranging somehow that we shall be drawn more together — know together something nobody else knows. I should like so terrifically to have a RELATION that is a secret, with you."

"Oh if that's all you want you can be easily gratified. Rien de plus facile, as mamma says. I'm full of secrets — I think I'm really most secretive. I'll share almost any one of them with you — if it's only a good one."

Mitchy debated. "You mean you'll choose it yourself? You won't let it be one of mine?"

Nanda wondered. "But what's the difference?"

Her companion jumped up again and for a moment pervaded the place. "When you say such things as that, you're of a beauty — ! MAY it," he asked as he stopped before her, "be one of mine — a perfectly awful one?"

She showed her clearest interest. "As I suppose the most awful secrets are the best — yes, certainly."

"I'm hideously tempted." But he hung fire; then dropping into his chair again: "It would be too bad. I'm afraid I can't."

"Then why won't THIS do, just as it is?"

"'This'?" He looked over the big bland room. "Which?"

"Why what you're here for?"

"My dear child I'm here — most of all — to love you more than ever; and there's an absence of favouring mystery about THAT — !" She looked at him as if seeing what he meant and only asking to remedy it. "There's a certain amount of mystery we can now MAKE — that it strikes me in fact we MUST make. Dear Mitchy," she continued almost with eagerness, "I don't think we CAN really tell."

He had fallen back in his chair, not looking at her now, and with his hands, from his supported elbows, clasped to keep himself more quiet. "Are you still talking about Aggie?"

"Why I've scarcely begun!"

"Oh!" It was not irritation he appeared to express, but the slight strain of an effort to get into relation with the subject. Better to focus the image he closed his eyes a while.

"You speak of something that may draw us together, and I simply reply that if you don't feel how near together we are — in this I shouldn't imagine you ever would. You must have wonderful notions," she presently went on, "of the ideal state of union. I pack every one off for you — I banish everything that can interfere, and I don't in the least mind your knowing that I find the consequence delightful. YOU may talk, if

you like, of what will have passed between us, but I shall never mention it to a soul; literally not to a living creature. What do you want more than that?" He opened his eyes in deference to the question, but replied only with a gaze as unassisted as if it had come through a hole in a curtain. "You say you're ready for an adventure, and it's just an adventure that I propose. If I can make you feel for yourself as I feel for you the beauty of your chance to go in and save her — !"

"Well, if you can — ?" Mitchy at last broke in. "I don't think, you know," he said after a moment, "you'll find it easy to make your two ends meet."

She thought a little longer. "One of the ends is yours, so that you'll act WITH me. If I wind you up so that you go — !"

"You'll just happily sit and watch me spin? Thank you! THAT will be my reward?"

Nanda rose on this from her chair as with the impulse of protest. "Shan't you care for my gratitude, my admiration?"

"Oh yes" — Mitchy seemed to muse. "I shall care for THEM. Yet I don't quite see, you know, what you OWE to Aggie. It isn't as if — !" But with this he faltered.

"As if she cared particularly for ME? Ah that has nothing to do with it; that's a thing without which surely it's but too possible to be exquisite. There are beautiful, quite beautiful people who don't care for me. The thing that's important to one is the thing one sees one's self, and it's quite enough if *I* see what can be made of that child. Marry her, Mitchy, and you'll see who she'll care for!"

Mitchy kept his position; he was for the moment — his image of shortly before reversed — the one who appeared to sit happily and watch. "It's too awfully pleasant your asking of me anything whatever!"

"Well then, as I say, beautifully, grandly save her."

"As you say, yes" — he sympathetically inclined his head. "But without making me feel exactly what you mean by it."

"Keep her," Nanda returned, "from becoming like the Duchess."

"But she isn't a bit like the Duchess in any of her elements. She's a totally different thing."

It was only for an instant, however, that this objection seemed to tell. "That's exactly why she'll be so perfect for you. You'll get her away — take her out of her aunt's life."

Mitchy met it all now in a sort of spellbound stillness. "What do you know about her aunt's life?"

"Oh I know everything!" She spoke with her first faint shade of impatience.

It produced for a little a hush between them, at the end of which her companion said with extraordinary gentleness and tenderness: "Dear old Nanda!" Her own silence appeared consciously to continue, and the suggestion of it might have been that for intelligent ears there was nothing to add to the declaration she had just made and which Mitchy sat there taking in as with a new light. What he drew from it indeed he presently went on to show. "You're too awfully interesting. Of course — you know a lot. How shouldn't you — and why?"

"'Why'? Oh that's another affair! But you don't imagine what I know; I'm sure it's much more than you've a notion of. That's the kind of thing now one IS — just except the little marvel of Aggie. What on earth," the girl pursued, "do you take us for?"

"Oh it's all right!" breathed Mitchy, divinely pacific.

"I'm sure I don't know whether it is; I shouldn't wonder if it were in fact all wrong. But what at least is certainly right is for one not to pretend anything else. There I am for you at any rate. Now the beauty of Aggie is that she knows nothing — but absolutely, utterly: not the least little tittle of anything."

It was barely visible that Mitchy hesitated, and he spoke quite gravely. "Have you tried her?"

"Oh yes. And Tishy has." His gravity had been less than Nanda's. "Nothing, nothing." The memory of some scene or some passage might have come back to her with a charm. "Ah say what you will — it IS the way we ought to be!"

Mitchy, after a minute of much intensity, had stopped watching her; changing his posture and with his elbows on his knees he dropped for a while his face into his hands. Then he jerked himself to his feet. "There's something I wish awfully I could say to you. But I can't."

Nanda, after a slow headshake, covered him with one of the dimmest of her smiles. "You needn't say it. I know perfectly which it is." She held him an instant, after which she went on: "It's simply that you wish me fully to understand that you're one who, in perfect sincerity, doesn't mind one straw how awful — !"

"Yes, how awful?" He had kindled, as he paused, with his new eagerness.

"Well, one's knowledge may be. It doesn't shock in you a single hereditary prejudice."

"Oh 'hereditary' — !" Mitchy ecstatically murmured.

"You even rather like me the better for it; so that one of the reasons why you couldn't have told me — though not of course, I know, the only one — is that you would have been literally almost ashamed. Because, you know," she went on, "it IS strange."

"My lack of hereditary — ?"

"Yes, discomfort in presence of the fact I speak of. There's a kind of sense you don't possess."

His appreciation again fairly goggled at her. "Oh you do know everything!"

"You're so good that nothing shocks you," she lucidly persisted. "There's a kind of delicacy you haven't got."

He was more and more struck. "I've only that — as it were — of the skin and the fingers?" he appealed.

"Oh and that of the mind. And that of the soul. And some other kinds certainly. But not THE kind."

"Yes" — he wondered— "I suppose that's the only way one can name it." It appeared to rise there before him. "THE kind!"

"The kind that would make me painful to you. Or rather not me perhaps," she added as if to create between them the fullest possible light; "but my situation, my exposure — all the results of them I show. Doesn't one become a sort of a little drain-pipe with everything flowing through?"

"Why don't you call it more gracefully," Mitchy asked, freshly struck, "a little aeolian-harp set in the drawing-room window and vibrating in the breeze of conversation?"

"Oh because the harp gives out a sound, and WE — at least we try to — give out none."

"What you take, you mean, you keep?"

"Well, it sticks to us. And that's what you don't mind!"

Their eyes met long on it. "Yes — I see. I DON'T mind. I've the most extraordinary lacunae."

"Oh I don't know about others," Nanda replied; "I haven't noticed them. But you've that one, and it's enough."

He continued to face her with his queer mixture of assent and speculation. "Enough for what, my dear? To have made me impossible for you because the only man you could, as they say, have 'respected' would be a man who WOULD have minded?" Then as under the cool soft pressure of the question she looked at last away from him: "The man with 'THE kind,' as you call it, happens to be just the type you CAN love? But what's the use," he persisted as she answered nothing, "in loving a person with the prejudice — hereditary or other — to which you're precisely obnoxious? Do you positively LIKE to love in vain?"

It was a question, the way she turned back to him seemed to say, that deserved a responsible answer. "Yes."

But she had moved off after speaking, and Mitchy's eyes followed her to different parts of the room as, with small pretexts of present attention to it, small bestowed touches for symmetry, she slowly measured it. "What's extraordinary then is your idea of my finding any charm in Aggie's ignorance."

She immediately put down an old snuff-box. "Why — it's the one sort of thing you don't know. You can't imagine," she said as she returned to him, "the effect it will produce on you. You must get really near it and see it all come out to feel all its beauty. You'll like it, Mitchy" — and Nanda's gravity was wonderful— "better than anything you HAVE known."

The clear sincerity of this, even had there been nothing else, imposed a consideration that Mitchy now flagrantly could give, and the deference of his suggestion of difficulty only grew more deep. "I'm to do then, with this happy condition of hers, what you say YOU'VE done — to 'try' it?" And then as her assent, so directly challenged, failed an instant: "But won't my approach to it, however cautious, be just what will break it up and spoil it?"

Nanda thought. "Why so — if mine wasn't?"

"Oh you're not me!"

"But I'm just as bad."

"Thank you, my dear!" Mitchy rang out.

"Without," Nanda pursued, "being as good." She had on this, in a different key, her own sudden explosion. "Don't you see, Mitchy dear — for the very heart of it all — how good I BELIEVE you?"

She had spoken as with a flare of impatience at some justice he failed to do her, and this brought him after a startled instant close enough to her to take up her hand. She let him have it, and in mute solemn reassurance

he raised it to his lips, saying to her thus more things than he could say in any other way; which yet just after, when he had released it and a motionless pause had ensued, didn't prevent his adding three words. "Oh Nanda, Nanda!"

The tone of them made her again extraordinarily gentle. "Don't 'try' anything then. Take everything for granted."

He had turned away from her and walked mechanically, with his air of blind emotion, to the window, where for a minute he looked out. "It has stopped raining," he said at last; "it's going to brighten."

The place had three windows, and Nanda went to the next. "Not quite yet — but I think it will."

Mitchy soon faced back into the room, where after a brief hesitation he moved, as quietly, almost as cautiously, as if on tiptoe, to the seat occupied by his companion at the beginning of their talk. Here he sank down watching the girl, who stood a while longer with her eyes on the garden. "You want me, you say, to take her out of the Duchess's life; but where am I myself, if we come to that, but even more IN the Duchess's life than Aggie is? I'm in it by my contacts, my associations, my indifferences — all my acceptances, knowledges, amusements. I'm in it by my cynicisms — those that circumstances somehow from the first, when I began for myself to look at life and the world, committed me to and steeped me in; I'm in it by a kind of desperation that I shouldn't have felt perhaps if you had got hold of me sooner with just this touch with which you've got hold of me to-day; and I'm in it more than all — you'll yourself admit — by the very fact that her aunt desires, as you know, much more even than you do, to bring the thing about. Then we SHOULD be — the Duchess and I — shoulder to shoulder!"

Nanda heard him motionless to the end, taking also another minute to turn over what he had said. "What is it you like so in Lord Petherton?" she asked as she came to him.

"My dear child, if you only could tell me! It would be, wouldn't it? — it must have been — the subject of some fairy-tale, if fairy-tales were made now, or better still of some Christmas pantomime: 'The Gnome and the Giant.'"

Nanda appeared to try — not with much success — to see it. "Do you find Lord Petherton a Gnome?"

Mitchy at first, for all reward, only glared at her. "Charming, Nanda — charming!"

"A man's giant enough for Lord Petherton," she went on, "when his fortune's gigantic. He preys upon you."

His hands in his pockets and his legs much apart, Mitchy sat there as in a posture adapted to her simplicity. "You're adorable. YOU don't. But it IS rather horrid, isn't it?" he presently went on.

Her momentary silence would have been by itself enough of an answer. "Nothing — of all you speak of," she nevertheless returned, "will matter then. She'll so simplify your life." He remained just as he was, only with his eyes on her; and meanwhile she had turned again to her window, through which a faint sun-streak began to glimmer and play. At sight of it she opened the casement to let in the warm freshness. "The rain HAS stopped."

"You say you want me to save her. But what you really mean," Mitchy resumed from the sofa, "isn't at all exactly that."

Nanda, without heeding the remark, took in the sunshine. "It will be charming now in the garden."

Her friend got up, found his wonderful crossbarred cap, after a glance, on a neighbouring chair, and with it came toward her. "Your hope is that — as I'm good enough to be worth it — she'll save ME."

Nanda looked at him now. "She will, Mitchy — she WILL!"

They stood a moment in the recovered brightness; after which he mechanically — as with the pressure of quite another consciousness — put on his cap. "Well then, shall that hope between us be the thing — ?"

"The thing?" — she just wondered.

"Why that will have drawn us together — to hold us so, you know — this afternoon. I mean the secret we spoke of."

She put out to him on this the hand he had taken a few minutes before, and he clasped it now only with the firmness it seemed to give and to ask for. "Oh it will do for that!" she said as they went out together.

III

It had been understood that he was to take his leave on the morrow, though Vanderbank was to stay another day. Mr. Longdon had for the Sunday dinner invited three or four of his neighbours to "meet" the two gentlemen from town, so that it was not till the company had departed, or in other words till near bedtime, that our four friends could again have become aware, as between themselves, of that directness of mutual relation which forms the subject of our picture. It had not, however, prevented Nanda's slipping upstairs as soon as the doctor and his wife had gone, and the manner indeed in which, on the stroke of eleven, Mr. Longdon conformed to his tradition of appropriating a particular candle was as positive an expression of it as any other. Nothing in him was more amiable than the terms maintained between the rigour of his personal habits and his free imagination of the habits of others. He deprecated as regards the former, it might have been seen, most signs of likeness, and no one had ever dared to learn how he would have handled a show of imitation. "The way to flatter him," Mitchy threw off five minutes later, "is not to make him think you resemble or agree with him, but to let him see how different you perceive he can bear to think you. I mean of course without hating you."

"But what interest have YOU," Vanderbank asked, "in the way to flatter him?"

"My dear fellow, more interest than you. I haven't been here all day without arriving at conclusions on the credit he has opened to you — !"

"Do you mean the amount he'll settle?"

"You have it in your power," said Mitchy, "to make it anything you like."

"And is he then — so bloated?"

Mitchy was on his feet in the apartment in which their host had left them, and he had at first for this question but an expressive motion of the shoulders in respect to everything in the room. "See, judge, guess, feel!"

But it was as if Vanderbank, before the fire, consciously controlled his own attention. "Oh I don't care a hang!"

This passage took place in the library and as a consequence of their having confessed, as their friend faced them with his bedroom light, that a brief discreet vigil and a box of cigars would fix better than anything else the fine impression of the day. Mitchy might at that moment, on the evidence of the eyes Mr. Longdon turned to them and of which his innocent candle-flame betrayed the secret, have found matter for a measure of the almost extreme allowances he wanted them to want of him. They had only to see that the greater window was fast and to turn out the library lamp. It might really have amused them to stand a moment at the open door that, apart from this, was to testify to his conception of those who were not, in the smaller hours, as HE was. He had in fact by his retreat — and but too sensibly — left them there with a deal of midnight company. If one of these presences was the mystery he had himself mixed the manner of our young men showed a due expectation of the others. Mitchy, on hearing how little Vanderbank "cared," only kept up a while longer that observant revolution in which he had spent much of his day, to which any fresh sense of any exhibition always promptly committed him, and which, had it not been controlled by infinite tact, might have affected the nerves of those in whom enjoyment was less rotary. He was silent long enough to suggest his fearing that almost anything he might say would appear too allusive; then at last once more he took his risk. "Awfully jolly old place!"

"It is indeed," Van only said; but his posture in the large chair he had pushed toward the open window was of itself almost an opinion. The August night was hot and the air that came in charged and sweet. Vanderbank smoked with his face to the dusky garden and the dim stars; at the end of a few moments more of which he glanced round. "Don't you think it rather stuffy with that big lamp? As those candles on the chimney are going we might put it out."

"Like this?" The amiable Mitchy had straightway obliged his companion and he as promptly took in the effect of the diminished light on the character of the room, which he commended as if the depth of shadow produced were all this companion had sought. He might freshly have brought home to Vanderbank that a man sensitive to so many different things, and thereby always sure of something or other, could never really be incommoded; though that personage presently indeed showed himself occupied with another thought.

"I think I ought to mention to you that I've told him how you and Mrs. Brook now both know. I did so this

afternoon on our way back from church — I hadn't done it before. He took me a walk round to show me more of the place, and that gave me my chance. But he doesn't mind," Vanderbank continued. "The only thing is that I've thought it may possibly make him speak to you, so that it's better you should know he knows. But he told me definitely Nanda doesn't."

Mitchy took this in with an attention that spoke of his already recognising how the less tempered darkness favoured talk. "And is that all that passed between you?"

"Well, practically; except of course that I made him understand, I think, how it happened that I haven't kept my own counsel."

"Oh but you HAVE — didn't he at least feel? — or perhaps even have done better, when you've two such excellent persons to keep it FOR you. Can't he easily believe how we feel with you?"

Vanderbank appeared for a minute to leave this appeal unheeded; he continued to stare into the garden while he smoked and swung the long leg he had thrown over the arm of the chair. When he at last spoke, however, it was with some emphasis — perhaps even with some vulgarity. "Oh rot!"

Mitchy hovered without an arrest. "You mean he CAN'T feel?"

"I mean it isn't true. I've no illusions about you. I know how you're both affected, though I of course perfectly trust you."

Mitchy had a short silence. "Trust us not to speak?"

"Not to speak to Nanda herself — though of course too if you spoke to others," Vanderbank went on, "they'd immediately rush and tell her."

"I've spoken to no one," said Mitchy. "I'm sure of it. And neither has Mrs. Brook."

"I'm glad you're sure of that also," Mitchy returned, "for it's only doing her justice."

"Oh I'm quite confident of it," said Vanderbank. "And without asking her?"

"Perfectly."

"And you're equally sure, without asking, that *I* haven't betrayed you?" After which, while, as if to let the question lie there in its folly, Vanderbank said nothing, his friend pursued: "I came, I must tell you, terribly near it to-day."

"Why must you tell me? Your coming 'near' doesn't concern me, and I take it you don't suppose I'm watching or sounding you. Mrs. Brook will have come terribly near," Vanderbank continued as if to make the matter free; "but she won't have done it either. She'll have been distinctly tempted — !"

"But she won't have fallen?" Mitchy broke in. "Exactly — there we are. *I* was distinctly tempted and I didn't fall. I think your certainty about Mrs. Brook," he added, "shows you do know her. She's incapable of anything deliberately nasty."

"Oh of anything nasty in any way," Vanderbank said musingly and kindly.

"Yes; one knows on the whole what she WON'T do." After which, for a period, Mitchy roamed and reflected. "But in spite of the assurance given you by Mr. Longdon — or perhaps indeed just because of your having taken it — I think I ought to mention to you my belief that Nanda does know of his offer to you. I mean by having guessed it."

"Oh!" said Vanderbank.

"There's in fact more still," his companion pursued— "that I feel I should like to mention to you."

"Oh!" Vanderbank at first only repeated. But after a moment he said: "My dear fellow, I'm much obliged."

"The thing I speak of is something I should at any rate have said, and I should have looked out for some chance if we had not had this one." Mitchy spoke as if his friend's last words were not of consequence, and he continued as Vanderbank got up and, moving rather aimlessly, came and stood with his back to the chimney. "My only hesitation would have been caused by its entailing our going down into things in a way that, face to face — given the private nature of the things — I dare say most men don't particularly enjoy. But if you don't mind — !"

"Oh I don't mind. In fact, as I tell you, I recognise an obligation to you." Vanderbank, with his shoulders against the high mantel, uttered this without a direct look; he smoked and smoked, then considered the tip of his cigar. "You feel convinced she knows?" he threw out.

"Well, it's my impression."

"Ah any impression of yours — of that sort — is sure to be right. If you think I ought to have it from you I'm really grateful. Is that — a — what you wanted to say to me?" Vanderbank after a slight pause demanded.

Mitchy, watching him more than he watched Mitchy, shook a mildly decisive head. "No."

Vanderbank, his eyes on his smoke-puffs, seemed to wonder. “What you wanted is — something else?”

“Something else.”

“Oh!” said Vanderbank for the third time.

The ejaculation had been vague, but the movement that followed it was definite; the young man, turning away, found himself again near the chair he had quitted, and resumed possession of it as a sign of being at his friend’s service. This friend, however, not only hung fire but finally went back to take a shot from a quarter they might have been supposed to have left. “It strikes me as odd his imagining — awfully acute as he is — that she has NOT guessed. One wouldn’t have thought he could live with her here in such an intimacy — seeing her every day and pretty much all day — and make such a mistake.”

Vanderbank, his great length all of a lounge again, turned it over. “And yet I do thoroughly feel the mistake’s not yours.”

Mitchy had a new serenity of affirmation. “Oh it’s not mine.”

“Perhaps then” — it occurred to his friend— “he doesn’t really believe it.”

“And only says so to make you feel more easy?”

“So that one may — in fairness to one’s self — keep one’s head, as it were, and decide quite on one’s own grounds.”

“Then you HAVE still to decide?”

Vanderbank took time to answer. “I’ve still to decide.” Mitchy became again on this, in the sociable dusk, a slow-circling vaguely-agitated element, and his companion continued: “Is your idea very generously and handsomely to help that by letting me know — ?”

“That I do definitely renounce” — Mitchy took him up— “any pretension and any hope? Well, I’m ready with a proof of it. I’ve passed my word that I’ll apply elsewhere.”

Vanderbank turned more round to him. “Apply to the Duchess for her niece?”

“It’s practically settled.”

“But since when?”

Mitchy barely faltered. “Since this afternoon.”

“Ah then not with the Duchess herself.”

“With Nanda — whose plan from the first, you won’t have forgotten, the thing has so charmingly been.”

Vanderbank could show that his not having in the least forgotten was yet not a bar to his being now mystified. “But, my dear man, what can Nanda ‘settle’?”

“My fate,” Mitchy said, pausing well before him.

Vanderbank sat now a minute with raised eyes, catching the indistinctness of the other’s strange expression. “You’re both beyond me!” he exclaimed at last. “I don’t see what you in particular gain.”

“I didn’t either till she made it all out to me. One sees then, in such a matter, for one’s self. And as everything’s gain that isn’t loss, there was nothing I COULD lose. It gets me,” Mitchy further explained, “out of the way.”

“Out of the way of what?”

This, Mitchy frankly showed, was more difficult to say, but he in time brought it out. “Well, of appearing to suggest to you that my existence, in a prolonged state of singleness, may ever represent for her any real alternative.”

“But alternative to what?”

“Why to being YOUR wife, damn you!” Mitchy, on these words turned away again, and his companion, in the presence of his renewed dim gyrations, sat for a minute dumb. Before Van had spoken indeed he was back again. “Excuse my violence, but of course you really see.”

“I’m not pretending anything,” Vanderbank said— “but a man MUST understand. What I catch hold of is that you offer me — in the fact that you’re thus at any rate disposed of — a proof that I, by the same token, shan’t, if I hesitate to ‘go in,’ have a pretext for saying to myself that I MAY deprive her — !”

“Yes, precisely,” Mitchy now urbanely assented: “of something — in the shape of a man with MY amount of money — that she may live to regret and to languish for. My amount of money, don’t you see?” he very simply added, “is nothing to her.”

“And you want me to be sure that — so far as I may ever have had a scruple — she has had her chance and got rid of it.”

“Completely,” Mitchy smiled.

"Because" — Vanderbank with the aid of his cigar thoughtfully pieced it out— "that may possibly bring me to the point."

"Possibly!" Mitchy laughed.

He had stood a moment longer, almost as if to see the possibility develop before his eyes, and had even started at the next sound of his friend's voice. What Vanderbank in fact brought out, however, only made him turn his back. "Do you like so very much little Aggie?"

"Well," said Mitchy, "Nanda does. And I like Nanda."

"You're too amazing," Vanderbank mused. His musing had presently the effect of making him rise; meditation indeed beset him after he was on his feet. "I can't help its coming over me then that on such an extraordinary system you must also rather like ME."

"What will you have, my dear Van?" Mitchy frankly asked. "It's the sort of thing you must be most used to. For at the present moment — look! — aren't we all at you at once?"

It was as if his dear Van had managed to appear to wonder. "'All'?"

"Nanda, Mrs. Brook, Mr. Longdon — !"

"And you. I see."

"Names of distinction. And all the others," Mitchy pursued, "that I don't count."

"Oh you're the best."

"I?"

"You're the best," Vanderbank simply repeated. "It's at all events most extraordinary," he declared. "But I make you out on the whole better than I do Mr. Longdon."

"Ah aren't we very much the same — simple lovers of life? That is of that finer essence of it which appeals to the consciousness—"

"The consciousness?" — his companion took up his hesitation.

"Well, enlarged and improved."

The words had made on Mitchy's lips an image by which his friend appeared for a moment held. "One doesn't really know quite what to say or to do."

"Oh you must take it all quietly. You're of a special class; one of those who, as we said the other day — don't you remember? — are a source of the sacred terror. People made in such a way must take the consequences; just as people must take them," Mitchy went on, "who are made as *I* am. So cheer up!"

Mitchy, uttering this incitement, had moved to the empty chair by the window, in which he presently was sunk; and it might have been in emulation of his previous strolling and straying that Vanderbank himself now began to revolve. The meditation he next threw out, however, showed a certain resistance to Mitchy's advice. "I'm glad at any rate I don't deprive her of a fortune."

"You don't deprive her of mine of course," Mitchy answered from the chair; "but isn't her enjoyment of Mr. Longdon's at least a good deal staked after all on your action?"

Vanderbank stopped short. "It's his idea to settle it ALL?"

Mitchy gave out his glare. "I thought you didn't 'care a hang.' I haven't been here so long," he went on as his companion at first retorted nothing, "without making up my mind for myself about his means. He IS distinctly bloated."

It sent Vanderbank off again. "Oh well, she'll no more get all in the one event than she'll get nothing in the other. She'll only get a sort of provision. But she'll get that whatever happens."

"Oh if you're sure — !" Mitchy simply commented.

"I'm not sure, confound it!" Then — for his voice had been irritated — Van spoke more quietly. "Only I see her here — though on his wish of course — handling things quite as if they were her own and paying him a visit without, apparently, any calculable end. What's that on HIS part but a pledge?"

Oh Mitchy could show off-hand that he knew what it was. "It's a pledge, quite as much, to you. He shows you the whole thing. He likes you not a whit less than he likes her."

"Oh thunder!" Van impatiently sighed.

"It's as 'rum' as you please, but there it is," said the inexorable Mitchy.

"Then does he think I'll do it for THIS?"

"For 'this'?"

"For the place, the whole thing, as you call it, that he shows me."

Mitchy had a short silence that might have represented a change of colour. "It isn't good enough?" But he

instantly took himself up. “Of course he wants — as I do — to treat you with tact!”

“Oh it’s all right,” Vanderbank immediately said. “Your ‘tact’ — yours and his — is marvellous, and Nanda’s greatest of all.”

Mitchy’s momentary renewal of stillness was addressed, he somehow managed not obscurely to convey, to the last clause of his friend’s speech. “If you’re not sure,” he presently resumed, “why can’t you frankly ask him?”

Vanderbank again, as the phrase is, “mooned” about a little. “Because I don’t know that it would do.”

“What do you mean by ‘do’?”

“Well, that it would be exactly — what do you call it?— ‘square.’ Or even quite delicate or decent. To take from him, in the way of an assurance so handsomely offered, so much, and then to ask for more: I don’t feel I can do it. Besides, I’ve my little conviction. To the question itself he might easily reply that it’s none of my business.”

“I see,” Mitchy dropped. “Such pressure might suggest to him moreover that you’re hesitating more than you perhaps really are.”

“Oh as to THAT” said Vanderbank, “I think he practically knows how much.”

“And how little?” He met this, however, with no more form than if it had been a poor joke, so that Mitchy also smoked for a moment in silence. “It’s your coming down here, you mean, for these three or four days, that will have fixed it?”

The question this time was one to which the speaker might have expected an answer, but Vanderbank’s only immediate answer was to walk and walk. “I want so awfully to be kind to her,” he at last said.

“I should think so!” Then with irrelevance Mitchy harked back. “Shall *I* find out?”

But Vanderbank, with another thought, had lost the thread. “Find out what?”

“Why if she does get anything — !”

“If I’m not kind ENOUGH?” — Van had caught up again. “Dear no; I’d rather you shouldn’t speak unless first spoken to.”

“Well, HE may speak — since he knows we know.”

“It isn’t likely, for he can’t make out why I told you.”

“You didn’t tell ME, you know,” said Mitchy. “You told Mrs. Brook.”

“Well, SHE told you, and her talking about it is the unpleasant idea. He can’t get her down anyhow.”

“Poor Mrs. Brook!” Mitchy meditated.

“Poor Mrs. Brook!” his companion echoed.

“But I thought you said,” he went on, “that he doesn’t mind.”

“YOUR knowing? Well, I dare say he doesn’t. But he doesn’t want a lot of gossip and chatter.”

“Oh!” said Mitchy with meekness.

“I may absolutely take it from you then,” Vanderbank presently resumed, “that Nanda has her idea?”

“Oh she didn’t tell me so. But it’s none the less my belief.”

“Well,” Vanderbank at last threw off, “I feel it for myself. If only because she always knows everything,” he pursued without looking at Mitchy. “She always knows everything, everything.”

“Everything, everything.” Mitchy got up.

“She told me so herself yesterday,” said Van.

“And she told ME so to-day.”

Vanderbank’s hesitation might have shown he was struck with this. “Well, I don’t think it’s information that either of us required. But of course she — can’t help it,” he added. “Everything, literally everything, in London, in the world she lives in, is in the air she breathes — so that the longer SHE’S in it the more she’ll know.”

“The more she’ll know, certainly,” Mitchy acknowledged. “But she isn’t in it, you see, down here.”

“No. Only she appears to have come down with such accumulations. And she won’t be here for ever,” Vanderbank hastened to mention. “Certainly not if you marry her.”

“But isn’t that at the same time,” Vanderbank asked, “just the difficulty?”

Mitchy looked vague. “The difficulty?”

“Why as a married woman she’ll be steeped in it again.”

“Surely” — oh Mitchy could be candid! “But the difference will be that for a married woman it won’t matter. It only matters for girls,” he plausibly continued— “and then only for those on whom no one takes

pity."

"The trouble is," said Vanderbank — but quite as if uttering only a general truth— "that it's just a thing that may sometimes operate as a bar to pity. Isn't it for the non-marrying girls that it doesn't particularly matter? For the others it's such an odd preparation."

"Oh I don't mind it!" Mitchy declared.

Vanderbank visibly demurred. "Ah but your choice — !"

"Is such a different sort of thing?" Mitchy, for the half-hour, in the ambiguous dusk, had never looked more droll. "The young lady I named isn't my CHOICE."

"Well then, that's only a sign the more that you do these things more easily."

"Oh 'easily'!" Mitchy murmured.

"We oughtn't at any rate to keep it up," said Vanderbank, who had looked at his watch. "Twelve twenty-five — good-night. Shall I blow out the candles?"

"Do, please. I'll close the window" — and Mitchy went to it. "I'll follow you — good-night." The candles after a minute were out and his friend had gone, but Mitchy, left in darkness face to face with the vague quiet garden, still stood there.

BOOK EIGHTH. TISHY GRENDON

I

The footman, opening the door, mumbled his name without sincerity, and Vanderbank, passing in, found in fact — for he had caught the symptom — the chairs and tables, the lighted lamps and the flowers alone in possession. He looked at his watch, which exactly marked eight, then turned to speak again to the servant, who had, however, without another sound and as if blushing for the house, already closed him in. There was nothing indeed but Mrs. Grendon's want of promptness that failed of a welcome: her drawing-room, on the January night, showed its elegance through a suffusion of pink electricity which melted, at the end of the vista, into the faintly golden glow of a retreat still more sacred. Vanderbank walked after a moment into the second room, which also proved empty and which had its little globes of white fire — discreetly limited in number — coated with lemon-coloured silk. The walls, covered with delicate French mouldings, were so fair that they seemed vaguely silvered; the low French chimney had a French fire. There was a lemon-coloured stuff on the sofa and chairs, a wonderful polish on the floor that was largely exposed, and a copy of a French novel in blue paper on one of the spindle-legged tables. Vanderbank looked about him an instant as if generally struck, then gave himself to something that had particularly caught his eye. This was simply his own name written rather large on the cover of the French book and endowed, after he had taken the volume up, with the power to hold his attention the more closely the longer he looked at it. He uttered, for a private satisfaction, before letting the matter pass, a low confused sound; after which, flinging the book down with some emphasis in another place, he moved to the chimney-piece, where his eyes for a little intently fixed the small ashy wood-fire. When he raised them again it was, on the observation that the beautiful clock on the mantel was wrong, to consult once more his watch and then give a glance, in the chimney-glass, at the state of his moustache, the ends of which he twisted for a moment with due care. While so engaged he became aware of something else and, quickly facing about, recognised in the doorway of the room the other figure the glass had just reflected.

"Oh YOU?" he said with a quick handshake. "Mrs. Grendon's down?" But he had already passed with Nanda, on their greeting, back into the first room, which contained only themselves, and she had mentioned that she believed Tishy to have said 8.15, which meant of course anything people liked.

"Oh then there'll be nobody till nine. I didn't, I suppose, sufficiently study my note; which didn't mention to me, by the way," Vanderbank added, "that you were to be here."

"Ah but why SHOULD it?" Nanda spoke again, however, before he could reply. "I dare say that when she wrote to you she didn't know."

"Know you'd come bang up to meet me?" Vanderbank laughed. "Jolly at any rate, thanks to my mistake, to have in this way a quiet moment with you. You came on ahead of your mother?"

"Oh no — I'm staying here."

"Oh!" said Vanderbank.

"Mr. Longdon came up with me — I came here, Friday last, straight."

"You parted at the door?" he asked with marked gaiety.

She thought a moment — she was more serious. "Yes — but only for a day or two. He's coming tonight."

"Good. How delightful!"

"He'll be glad to see you," Nanda said, looking at the flowers.

"Awfully kind of him when I've been such a brute."

"How — a brute?"

"Well, I mean not writing — nor going back."

"Oh I see," Nanda simply returned.

It was a simplicity that, clearly enough, made her friend a little awkward. "Has he — a — minded? Hut he can't have complained!" he quickly added.

"Oh he never complains."

"No, no — it isn't in him. But it's just that," said Vanderbank, "that makes one feel so base. I've been ferociously busy."

"He knows that — he likes it," Nanda returned. "He delights in your work. And I've done what I can for him."

"Ah," said her companion, "you've evidently brought him round. I mean to this lady."

"To Tishy? Oh of course I can't leave her — with nobody."

"No" — Vanderbank became jocose again— "that's a London necessity. You can't leave anybody with nobody — exposed to everybody."

Mild as it was, however, Nanda missed the pleasantry. "Mr. Grendon's not here."

"Where is he then?"

"Yachting — but she doesn't know."

"Then she and you are just doing this together?"

"Well," said Nanda, "she's dreadfully frightened."

"Oh she mustn't allow herself," he returned, "to be too much carried away by it. But we're to have your mother?"

"Yes, and papa. It's really for Mitchy and Aggie," the girl went on— "before they go abroad."

"Ah then I see what you've come up for! Tishy and I aren't in it. It's all for Mitchy."

"If you mean there's nothing I wouldn't do for him you're quite right. He has always been of a kindness to me — !"

"That culminated in marrying your friend?" Vanderbank asked. "It was charming certainly, and I don't mean to diminish the merit of it. But Aggie herself, I gather, is of a charm now — !"

"Isn't she?" — Nanda was eager. "Hasn't she come out?"

"With a bound — into the arena. But when a young person's out with Mitchy — !"

"Oh you mustn't say anything against that. I've been out with him myself."

"Ah but my dear child — !" Van frankly argued.

It was not, however, a thing to notice. "I knew it would be just so. It always is when they've been like that."

"Do you mean as she apparently WAS? But doesn't it make one wonder a little IF she was?"

"Oh she was — I know she was. And we're also to have Harold," Nanda continued— "another of Mitchy's beneficiaries. It WOULD be a banquet, wouldn't it? if we were to have them all."

Vanderbank hesitated, and the look he fixed on the door might have suggested a certain open attention to the arrival of their hostess or the announcement of other guests. "If you haven't got them all, the beneficiaries, you've got, in having me, I should suppose, about the biggest."

"Ah what has he done for you?" Nanda asked.

Again her friend hung fire. "Do you remember something you said to me down there in August?"

She looked vague but quite unembarrassed. "I remember but too well that I chattered."

"You declared to me that you knew everything."

"Oh yes — and I said so to Mitchy too."

"Well, my dear child, you don't."

"Because I don't know — ?"

"Yes, what makes ME the victim of his insatiable benevolence."

"Ah well, if you've no doubt of it yourself that's all that's required. I'm quite GLAD to hear of something I don't know," Nanda pursued. "And we're to have Harold too," she repeated.

"As a beneficiary? Then we SHALL fill up! Harold will give us a stamp."

"Won't he? I hear of nothing but his success. Mother wrote me that people are frantic for him; and," said the girl after an instant, "do you know what Cousin Jane wrote me?"

"What WOULD she now? I'm trying to think."

Nanda relieved him of this effort. "Why that mother has transferred to him all the scruples she felt— 'even to excess' — in MY time, about what we might pick up among you all that wouldn't be good for us."

"That's a neat one for ME!" Vanderbank declared. "And I like your talk about your antediluvian 'time.'"

"Oh it's all over."

"What exactly is it," Vanderbank presently demanded, "that you describe in that manner?"

"Well, my little hour. And the danger of picking up."

"There's none of it here?"

Nanda appeared frankly to judge. "No — because, really, Tishy, don't you see? is natural. We just talk."

Vanderbank showed his interest. "Whereas at your mother's — ?"

"Well, you were all afraid."

Vanderbank laughed straight out. "Do you mind my telling her that?"

"Oh she knows it. I've heard her say herself you were."

"Ah *I* was," he concurred. "You know we've spoken of that before."

"I'm speaking now of all of you," said Nanda. "But it was she who was most so, for she tried — I know she did, she told me so — to control you. And it was when, you were most controlled — !"

Van's amusement took it up. "That we were most detrimental?"

"Yes, because of course what's so awfully unutterable is just what we most notice. Tishy knows that," Nanda wonderfully observed.

As the reflexion of her tone might have been caught by an observer in Vanderbank's face it was in all probability caught by his interlocutress, who superficially, however, need have recognised there — what was all she showed — but the right manner of waiting for dinner. "The better way then is to dash right in? That's what our friend here does?"

"Oh you know what she does!" the girl replied as with a sudden drop of interest in the question. She turned at the moment to the opening of the door.

It was Tishy who at last appeared, and her guest had his greeting ready. "We're talking of the delicate matters as to which you think it's better to dash right in; but I'm bound to say your inviting a hungry man to dinner doesn't appear to be one of them."

The sign of Tishy Grendon — as it had been often called in a society in which variety of reference had brought to high perfection, for usual safety, the sense of signs — was a retarded facial glimmer that, in respect to any subject, closed up the rear of the procession. It had been said of her indeed that when processions were at all rapid she was usually to be found, on a false impression of her whereabouts, mixed up with the next; so that now, for instance, by the time she had reached the point of saying to Vanderbank "Are you REALLY hungry?" Nanda had begun to appeal to him for some praise of their hostess's appearance. This was of course with soft looks up and down at her clothes. "Isn't she too nice? Did you ever see anything so lovely?"

"I'm so faint with inanition," Van replied to Mrs. Grendon, "that — like the traveller in the desert, isn't it? — I only make out, as an oasis or a mirage, a sweet green rustling blur. I don't trust you."

"I don't trust YOU," Nanda said on her friend's behalf. "She isn't 'green' — men are amazing: they don't know the dearest old blue that ever was seen."

"IS it your 'OLD blue'?" Vanderbank, monocular, very earnestly asked. "I can imagine it was 'dear,' but I should have thought — !"

"It was yellow" — Nanda helped him out— "if I hadn't kindly told you." Tishy's figure showed the confidence of objects consecrated by publicity; bodily speaking a beautiful human plant, it might have taken the last November gale to account for the completeness with which, in some quarters, she had shed her leaves. Her companions could only emphasise by the direction of their eyes the nature of the responsibility with which a spectator would have seen them saddled — a choice, as to consciousness, between the effect of her being and the effect of her not being dressed. "Oh I'm hideous — of course I know it," said Tishy. "I'm only just clean. Here's Nanda now, who's beautiful," she vaguely continued, "and Nanda—"

"Oh but, darling, Nanda's clean too!" the young lady in question interrupted; on which her fellow guest could only laugh with her as in relief from the antithesis of which her presence of mind had averted the completion, little indeed as in Mrs. Grendon's talk that element of style was usually involved.

"There's nothing in such a matter," Vanderbank observed as if it were the least he could decently say, "like challenging enquiry; and here's Harold, precisely," he went on in the next breath, "as clear and crisp and undefiled as a fresh five-pound note."

"A fresh one?" — Harold had passed in a flash from his hostess. "A man who like me hasn't seen one for six months could perfectly do, I assure you, with one that has lost its what-do-you-call it." He kissed Nanda with a friendly peck, then, more completely aware, had a straighter apprehension for Tishy. "My dear child, YOU seem to have lost something, though I'll say for you that one doesn't miss it."

Mrs. Grendon looked from him to Nanda. "Does he mean anything very nasty? I can only understand you when Nanda explains," she returned to Harold. "In fact there's scarcely anything I understand except when Nanda explains. It's too dreadful her being away so much now with strange people, whom I'm sure she can't begin to do for what she does for me; it makes me miss her all round. And the only thing I've come across that she CAN'T explain," Tishy bunched straight at her friend, "is what on earth she's doing there."

"Why she's working Mr. Longdon, like a good fine girl," Harold said; "like a good true daughter and even, though she doesn't love me nearly so much as I love HER, I will say, like a good true sister. I'm bound to tell

you, my dear Tishy," he went on, "that I think it awfully happy, with the trend of manners, for any really nice young thing to be a bit lost to sight. London, upon my honour, is quite too awful for girls, and any big house in the country is as much worse — with the promiscuities and opportunities and all that — as you know for yourselves. *I* know some places," Harold declared, "where, if I had any girls, I'd see 'em shot before I'd take 'em."

"Oh you know too much, my dear boy!" Vanderbank remarked with commiseration.

"Ah my brave old Van," the youth returned, "don't speak as if YOU had illusions. I know," he pursued to the ladies, "just where some of Van's must have perished, and some of the places I've in mind are just where he has left his tracks. A man must be wedded to sweet superstitions not nowadays to HAVE to open his eyes. Nanda love," he benevolently concluded, "stay where you are. So at least I shan't blush for you. That you've the good fortune to have reached your time of life with so little injury to your innocence makes you a case by yourself, of which we must recognise the claims. If Tishy can't make you gasp, that's nothing against you nor against HER — Tishy comes of one of the few innocent English families that are left. Yes, you may all cry 'Oho!' — but I defy you to name me say five, or at most seven, in which some awful thing or other hasn't happened. Of course ours is one, and Tishy's is one, and Van's is one, and Mr. Longdon's is one, and that makes you, bang off, four. So there you are!" Harold gaily wound up.

"I see now why he's the rage!" Vanderbank observed to Nanda.

But Mrs. Grendon expressed to their young friend a lingering wonder. "Do you mean you go in for the adoption — ?"

"Oh Tishy!" Nanda mildly murmured.

Harold, however, had his own tact. "The dear man's taking her quite over? Not altogether unreservedly. I'm with the governor: I think we ought to GET something. 'Oh yes, dear man, but what do you GIVE us for her?' — that's what *I* should say to him. I mean, don't you know, that I don't think she's making quite the bargain she might. If he were to want ME I don't say he mightn't have me, but I should have it on my conscience to make it in one way or another a good thing for my parents. You ARE nice, old woman" — he turned to his sister— "and one can still feel for the flower of your youth something of the wonderful 'reverence' that we were all brought up on. For God's sake therefore — all the more — don't really close with him till you've had another word or two with me. I'll be hanged" — he appealed to the company again — "if he shall have her for nothing!"

"See rather," Vanderbank said to Mrs. Grendon, "how little it's like your really losing her that she should be able this evening fairly to bring the dear man to you. At this rate we don't lose her — we simply get him as well."

"Ah but is it quite the dear man's COMPANY we want?" — and Harold looked anxious and acute. "If that's the best arrangement Nanda can make — !"

"If he hears us talking in this way, which strikes me as very horrible," Nanda interposed very simply and gravely, "I don't think we're likely to get anything."

"Oh Harold's talk," Vanderbank protested, "offers, I think, an extraordinary interest; only I'm bound to say it crushes me to the earth. I've to make at least, as I listen to him, a big effort to bear up. It doesn't seem long ago," he pursued to his young friend, "that I used to feel I was in it; but the way you bring home to me, dreadful youth, that I'm already NOT — !"

Harold looked earnest to understand. "The hungry generations tread you down — is that it?"

Vanderbank gave a pleasant tragic headshake. "We speak a different language."

"Ah but I think I perfectly understand yours!"

"That's just my anguish — and your advantage. It's awfully curious," Vanderbank went on to Nanda, "but I feel as if I must figure to him, you know, very much as Mr. Longdon figures to me. Mr. Longdon doesn't somehow get into me. Yet I do, I think, into him. But we don't matter!"

"'We'?" — Nanda, with her eyes on him, echoed it.

"Mr. Longdon and I. It can't be helped, I suppose," he went on, for Tishy, with sociable sadness, "but it IS short innings."

Mrs. Grendon, who was clearly credulous, looked positively frightened. "Ah but, my dear, thank you! I haven't begun to LIVE."

"Well, *I* have — that's just where it is," said Harold. "Thank you all the more, old Van, for the tip."

There was an announcement just now at the door, and Tishy turned to meet the Duchess, with Harold,

almost as if he had been master of the house, figuring but a step behind her. “Don’t mind HER,” Vanderbank immediately said to the companion with whom he was left, “but tell me, while I still have hold of you, who wrote my name on the French novel that I noticed a few minutes since in the other room?”

Nanda at first only wondered. “If it’s there — didn’t YOU?”

He just hesitated. “If it were here you’d see if it’s my hand.”

Nanda faltered, and for somewhat longer. “How should I see? What do I know of your hand?”

He looked at her hard. “You HAVE seen it.”

“Oh — so little!” she replied with a faint smile.

“Do you mean I’ve not written to you for so long? Surely I did in — when was it?”

“Yes, when? But why SHOULD you?” she asked in quite a different tone.

He was not prepared on this with the right statement, and what he did after a moment bring out had for the occasion a little the sound of the wrong. “The beauty of YOU is that you’re too good; which for me is but another way of saying you’re too clever. You make no demands. You let things go. You don’t allow in particular for the human weakness that enjoys an occasional glimpse of the weakness of others.”

She had deeply attended to him. “You mean perhaps one doesn’t show enough what one wants?”

“I think that must be it. You’re so fiendishly proud.”

She appeared again to wonder. “Not too much so, at any rate, only to want from YOU—”

“Well, what?”

“Why, what’s pleasant for yourself,” she simply said.

“Oh dear, that’s poor bliss!” he returned. “How does it come then,” he next said, “that with this barrenness of our intercourse I know so well YOUR hand?”

A series of announcements had meanwhile been made, with guests arriving to match them, and Nanda’s eyes at this moment engaged themselves with Mr. Longdon and her mother, who entered the room together. When she looked back to her companion she had had time to drop a consciousness of his question. “If I’m proud, to you, I’m not good,” she said, “and if I’m good — always to you — I’m not proud. I know at all events perfectly how immensely you’re occupied, what a quantity of work you get through and how every minute counts for you. Don’t make it a crime to me that I’m reasonable.”

“No, that would show, wouldn’t it? that there isn’t much else. But how it all comes back — !”

“Well, to what?” she asked.

“To the old story. You know how I’m occupied. You know how I work. You know how I manage my time.”

“Oh I see,” said Nanda. “It IS my knowing, after all, everything.”

“Everything. The book I just mentioned is one that, months ago — I remember now — I lent your mother.”

“Oh a thing in a blue cover? I remember then too.” Nanda’s face cleared up. “I had forgotten it was lying about here, but I must have brought it — in fact I remember I did — for Tishy. And I wrote your name on it so that we might know—”

“That I hadn’t lent it to either of you? It didn’t occur to you to write your own?” Vanderbank went on.

“Well, but if it isn’t mine? It ISN’T mine, I’m sure.”

“Therefore also if it can’t be Tishy’s—”

“The thing’s simple enough — it’s mother’s.”

“‘Simple’?” Vanderbank laughed. “I like you! And may I ask if you’ve read the remarkable work?”

“Oh yes.” Then she wonderfully said: “For Tishy.”

“To see if it would do?”

“I’ve often done that,” the girl returned.

“And she takes your word?”

“Generally. I think I remember she did that time.”

“And read the confounded thing?”

“Oh no!” said Nanda.

He looked at her a moment longer. “You’re too particular!” he rather oddly sounded, turning away with it to meet Mr. Longdon.

II

When after dinner the company was restored to the upper rooms the Duchess was on her feet as soon as the door opened for the entrance of the gentlemen. Then it might have been seen that she had a purpose, for as soon as the elements had again, with a due amount of the usual shuffling and mismatching, been mixed, her case proved the first to have been settled. She had got Mr. Longdon beside her on a sofa that was just right for two. "I've seized you without a scruple," she frankly said, "for there are things I want to say to you as well as very particularly to ask. More than anything else of course I want again to thank you."

No collapse of Mr. Longdon's was ever incompatible with his sitting well forward. "'Again'?"

"Do you look so blank," she demanded, "because you've really forgotten the gratitude I expressed to you when you were so good as to bring Nanda up for Aggie's marriage? — or because you don't think it a matter I should trouble myself to return to? How can I help it," she went on without waiting for his answer, "if I see your hand in everything that has happened since the so interesting talk I had with you last summer at Mertle? There have been times when I've really thought of writing to you; I've even had a bold bad idea of proposing myself to you for a Sunday. Then the crisis, my momentary alarm, has struck me as blowing over, and I've felt I could wait for some luck like this, which would sooner or later come." Her companion, however, appeared to leave the luck so on her hands that she could only snatch up, to cover its nudity, the next handsomest assumption. "I see you cleverly guess that what I've been worried about is the effect on Mrs. Brook of the loss of her dear Mitchy. If you've not at all events had your own impression of this effect, isn't that only because these last months you've seen so little of her? I'VE seen," said the Duchess, "enough and to spare." She waited as if for her vision, on this, to be flashed back at her, but the only result of her speech was that her friend looked hard at somebody else. It was just this symptom indeed that perhaps sufficed her, for in a minute she was again afloat. "Things have turned out so much as I desire them that I should really feel wicked not to have a humble heart. There's a quarter indeed," she added with a noble unction, "to which I don't fear to say for myself that no day and no night pass without my showing it. However, you English, I know, don't like one to speak of one's religion. I'm just as simply thankful for mine — I mean with as little sense of indecency or agony about it — as I am for my health or my carriage. My point is at any rate that I say in no cruel spirit of triumph, yet do none the less very distinctly say, that the person Mr. Mitchett's marriage has inevitably pleased least may be now rather to be feared." These words had the sound of a climax, and she had brought them out as if, with her duty done, to leave them; but something that took place, for her eye, in the face Mr. Longdon had half-averted gave her after an instant what he might have called her second wind. "Oh I know you think she always HAS been! But you've exaggerated — as to that; and I don't say that even at present it's anything we shan't get the better of. Only we must keep our heads. We must remember that from her own point of view she has her grievance, and we must at least look as if we trusted her. That, you know, is what you've never quite done."

He gave out a murmur of discomfort which produced in him a change of position, and the sequel to the change was that he presently accepted from his cushioned angle of the sofa the definite support it could offer. If his eyes moreover had not met his companion's they had been brought by the hand he repeatedly and somewhat distressfully passed over them closer to the question of which of the alien objects presented to his choice it would cost him least to profess to handle. What he had already paid, a spectator would easily have gathered from the long, the suppressed wriggle that had ended in his falling back, was some sacrifice of his habit of not privately depreciating those to whom he was publicly civil. It was plain, however, that when he presently spoke his thought had taken a stretch. "I'm sure I've fully intended to be everything that's proper. But I don't think Mr. Vanderbank cares for her."

It kindled in the Duchess an immediate light. "Vous avez bien de l'esprit. You put one at one's ease. I've been vaguely groping while you're already there. It's really only for Nanda he cares?"

"Yes — really."

The Duchess debated. "And yet exactly how much?"

"I haven't asked him."

She had another, a briefer pause. "Don't you think it about time you SHOULD?" Once more she waited, then seemed to feel her opportunity wouldn't. "We've worked a bit together, but you don't take me into your confidence. I dare say you don't believe I'm quite straight. Don't you really see how I MUST be?" She had a

pleading note which made him at last more consentingly face her. “Don’t you see,” she went on with the advantage of it, “that, having got all I want for myself, I haven’t a motive in the world for spoiling the fun of another? I don’t want in the least, I assure you, to spoil even Mrs. Brook’s; for how will she get a bit less out of him — I mean than she does now — if what you desire SHOULD take place? Honestly, my dear man, that’s quite what *I* desire, and I only want, over and above, to help you. What I feel for Nanda, believe me, is pure pity. I won’t say I’m frantically grateful to her, because in the long run — one way or another — she’ll have found her account. It nevertheless worries me to see her; and all the more because of this very certitude, which you’ve so kindly just settled for me, that our young man hasn’t really with her mother—”

Whatever the certitude Mr. Longdon had kindly settled, it was in another interest that he at this moment broke in. “Is he YOUR young man too?”

She was not too much amused to cast about her.

“Aren’t such marked ornaments of life a little the property of all who admire and enjoy them?”

“You ‘enjoy’ him?” Mr. Longdon asked in the same straightforward way.

“Immensely.”

His silence for a little seemed the sign of a plan. “What is it he hasn’t done with Mrs. Brook?”

“Well, the thing that WOULD be the complication. He hasn’t gone beyond a certain point. You may ask how one knows such matters, but I’m afraid I’ve not quite a receipt for it. A woman knows, but she can’t tell. They haven’t done, as it’s called, anything wrong.”

Mr. Longdon frowned. “It would be extremely horrid if they had.”

“Ah but, for you and me who know life, it isn’t THAT that — if other things had made for it — would have prevented! As it happens, however, we’ve got off easily. She doesn’t speak to him — !”

She had forms he could only take up. “‘Speak’ to him — ?”

“Why as much as she would have liked to be able to believe.”

“Then where’s the danger of which you appear to wish to warn me?”

“Just in her feeling in the case as most women would feel. You see she did what she could for her daughter. She did, I’m bound to say, as that sort of thing goes among you people, a good deal. She treasured up, she nursed along Mitchy, whom she would also, though of course not so much, have liked herself. Nanda could have kept him on with a word, becoming thereby so much the less accessible for YOUR plan. That would have thoroughly obliged her mother, but your little English girls, in these altered times — oh I know how you feel them! — don’t stand on such trifles; and — even if you think it odd of me — I can’t defend myself, though I’ve so directly profited, against a certain compassion also for Mrs. Brook’s upset. As a good-natured woman I feel in short for both of them. I deplore all round what’s after all a rather sad relation. Only, as I tell you, Nanda’s the one, I naturally say to myself, for me now most to think of; if I don’t assume too much, that is, that you don’t suffer by my freedom.”

Mr. Longdon put by with a mere drop of his eyes the question of his suffering: there was so clearly for him an issue more relevant. “What do you know of my ‘plan’?”

“Why, my dear man, haven’t I told you that ever since Mertle I’ve made out your hand? What on earth for other people can your action look like but an adoption?”

“Of — a — HIM?”

“You’re delightful. Of — a — HER! If it does come to the same thing for you, so much the better. That at any rate is what we’re all taking it for, and Mrs. Brook herself en tete. She sees — through your generosity — Nanda’s life more or less, at the worst, arranged for, and that’s just what gives her a good conscience.”

If Mr. Longdon breathed rather hard it seemed to show at least that he followed. “What does she want of a good conscience?”

From under her high tiara an instant she almost looked down at him. “Ah you do hate her!”

He coloured, but held his ground. “Don’t you tell me yourself she’s to be feared?”

“Yes, and watched. But — if possible — with amusement.”

“Amusement?” Mr. Longdon faintly gasped.

“Look at her now,” his friend went on with an indication that was indeed easy to embrace. Separated from them by the width of the room, Mrs. Brook was, though placed in profile, fully presented; the satisfaction with which she had lately sunk upon a light gilt chair marked itself as superficial and was moreover visibly not confirmed by the fact that Vanderbank’s high-perched head, arrested before her in a general survey of opportunity, kept her eyes too far above the level of talk. Their companions were dispersed, some in the other

room, and for the occupants of the Duchess's sofa they made, as a couple in communion, a picture, framed and detached, vaguely reduplicated in the high polish of the French floor. "She IS tremendously pretty." The Duchess appeared to drop this as a plea for indulgence and to be impelled in fact by the interlocutor's silence to carry it further. "I've never at all thought, you know, that Nanda touches her."

Mr. Longdon demurred. "Do you mean for beauty?"

His friend, for his simplicity, discriminated. "Ah they've neither of them 'beauty.' That's not a word to make free with. But the mother has grace."

"And the daughter hasn't

"Not a line. You answer me of course, when I say THAT, you answer me with your adored Lady Julia, and will want to know what then becomes of the lucky resemblance. I quite grant you that Lady Julia must have had the thing we speak of. But that dear sweet blessed thing is very much the same lost secret as the dear sweet blessed OTHER thing that went away with it — the decent leisure that, for the most part, we've also seen the last of. It's the thing at any rate that poor Nanda and all her kind have most effectually got rid of. Oh if you'd trust me a little more you'd see that I'm quite at one with you on all the changes for the worse. I bear up, but I'm old enough to have known. All the same Mrs. Brook has something — say what you like — when she bends that little brown head. Dieu sait comme elle se coiffe, but what she gets out of it! Only look."

Mr. Longdon conveyed in an indescribable manner that he had retired to a great distance; yet even from this position he must have launched a glance that arrived at a middle way. "They both know you're watching them."

"And don't they know YOU are? Poor Mr. Van has a consciousness!"

"So should I if two terrible women—"

"Were admiring you both at once?" The Duchess folded the big feathered fan that had partly protected their vision. "Well, SHE, poor dear, can't help it. She wants him herself."

At the drop of the Duchess's fan he restored his nippers. "And he doesn't — not a bit — want HER!"

"There it is. She has put down her money, as it were, without a return. She has given Mitchy up and got nothing instead."

There was delicacy, yet there was distinctness, in Mr. Longdon's reserve. "Do you call ME nothing?"

The Duchess, at this, fairly swelled with her happy stare. "Then it IS an adoption?" She forbore to press, however; she only went on: "It isn't a question, my dear man, of what *I* call it. YOU don't make love to her."

"Dear me," said Mr. Longdon, "what would she have had?"

"That could be more charming, you mean, than your famous 'loyalty'? Oh, caro mio, she wants it straighter! But I shock you," his companion quickly added.

The manner in which he firmly rose was scarce a denial; yet he stood for a moment in place. "What after all can she do?"

"She can KEEP Mr. Van."

Mr. Longdon wondered. "Where?"

"I mean till it's too late. She can work on him."

"But how?"

Covertly again the Duchess had followed the effect of her friend's perceived movement on Mrs. Brook, who also got up. She gave a rap with her fan on his leg. "Sit down — you'll see."

III

He mechanically obeyed her although it happened to lend him the air of taking Mrs. Brook's approach for a signal to resume his seat. She came over to them, Vanderbank followed, and it was without again moving, with a vague upward gape in fact from his place, that Mr. Longdon received as she stood before him a challenge of a sort to flash a point into what the Duchess had just said. "Why do you hate me so?"

Vanderbank, who, beside Mrs. Brook, looked at him with attention, might have suspected him of turning a trifle pale; though even Vanderbank, with reasons of his own for an observation of the sharpest, could scarce have read into the matter the particular dim vision that would have accounted for it — the flicker of fear of what Mrs. Brook, whether as daughter or as mother, was at last so strangely and differently to show herself.

"I should warn you, sir," the young man threw off, "how little we consider that — in Buckingham Crescent certainly — a fair question. It isn't playing the game — it's hitting below the belt. We hate and we love — the latter especially; but to tell each other why is to break that little tacit rule of finding out for ourselves which is the delight of our lives and the source of our triumphs. You can say, you know, if you like, but you're not obliged."

Mr. Longdon transferred to him something of the same colder apprehension, looking at him manifestly harder than ever before and finding in his eyes also no doubt a consciousness more charged. He presently got up, but, without answering Vanderbank, fixed again Mrs. Brook, to whom he echoed without expression: "Hate you?"

The next moment, while he remained in presence with Vanderbank, Mrs. Brook was pointing out her meaning to him from the cushioned corner he had quitted. "Why, when you come back to town you come straight, as it were, here."

"Ah what's that," the Duchess asked in his interest, "but to follow Nanda as closely as possible, or at any rate to keep well with her?"

Mrs. Brook, however, had no ear for this plea. "And when I, coming here too and thinking only of my chance to 'meet' you, do my very sweetest to catch your eye, you're entirely given up — !"

"To trying of course," the Duchess broke in afresh, "to keep well with ME!"

Mrs. Brook now had a smile for her. "Ah that takes precautions then that I shall perhaps fail of if I too much interrupt your conversation."

"Isn't she nice to me," the Duchess asked of Mr. Longdon, "when I was in the very act of praising her to the skies?"

Their interlocutor's reply was not too rapid to anticipate Mrs. Brook herself. "My dear Jane, that only proves his having reached some extravagance in the other sense that you had in mere decency to match. The truth is probably in the 'mean' — isn't that what they call it? — between you. Don't YOU now take him away," she went on to Vanderbank, who had glanced about for some better accommodation.

He immediately pushed forward the nearest chair, which happened to be by the Duchess's side of the sofa. "Will you sit here, sir?"

"If you'll stay to protect me."

"That was really what I brought him over to you for," Mrs. Brook said while Mr. Longdon took his place and Vanderbank looked out for another seat. "But I didn't know," she observed with her sweet free curiosity, "that he called you 'sir.'" She often made discoveries that were fairly childlike. "He has done it twice."

"Isn't that only your inevitable English surprise," the Duchess demanded, "at the civility quite the commonest in other societies? — so that one has to come here to find it regarded, in the way of ceremony, as the very end of the world!"

"Oh," Mr. Longdon remarked, "it's a word I rather like myself even to employ to others."

"I always ask here," the Duchess continued to him, "what word they've got instead. And do you know what they tell me?"

Mrs. Brook wondered, then again, before he was ready, charmingly suggested: "Our pretty manner?" Quickly too she appealed to Mr. Longdon. "Is THAT what you miss from me?"

He wondered, however, more than Mrs. Brook. "Your 'pretty manner'?"

"Well, these grand old forms that the Duchess is such a mistress of." Mrs. Brook had with this one of her eagerest visions. "Did mamma say 'sir' to you? Ought *I*? Do you really get it, in private, out of Nanda? SHE

has such depths of discretion," she explained to the Duchess and to Vanderbank, who had come back with his chair, "that it's just the kind of racy anecdote she never in the world gives me."

Mr. Longdon looked across at Van, placed now, after a moment's talk with Tishy in sight of them all, by Mrs. Brook's arm of the sofa. "You haven't protected — you've only exposed me."

"Oh there's no joy without danger" — Mrs. Brook took it up with spirit. "Perhaps one should even say there's no danger without joy."

Vanderbank's eyes had followed Mrs. Grendon after his brief passage with her, terminated by some need of her listless presence on the other side of the room. "What do you say then, on that theory, to the extraordinary gloom of our hostess? Her safety, by such a rule, must be deep."

The Duchess was this time the first to know what they said. "The expression of Tishy's face comes precisely from our comparing it so unfavourably with that of her poor sister Carrie, who, though she isn't here to-night with the Cashmores — amazing enough even as coming WITHOUT that! — has so often shown us that an ame en peine, constantly tottering, but, as Nanda guarantees us, usually recovering, may look after all as beatific as a Dutch doll."

Mrs. Brook's eyes had, on Tishy's passing away, taken the same course as Vanderbank's, whom she had visibly not neglected moreover while the pair stood there. "I give you Carrie, as you know, and I throw Mr. Cashmore in; but I'm lost in admiration to-night, as I always have been, of the way Tishy makes her ugliness serve. I should call it, if the word weren't so for ladies'-maids, the most 'elegant' thing I know."

"My dear child," the Duchess objected, "what you describe as making her ugliness serve is what I should describe as concealing none of her beauty. There's nothing the matter surely with 'elegant' as applied to Tishy save that as commonly used it refers rather to a charm that's artificial than to a state of pure nature. There should be for elegance a basis of clothing. Nanda rather stints her."

Mrs. Brook, perhaps more than usually thoughtful, just discriminated. "There IS, I think, one little place. I'll speak to her."

"To Tishy?" Vanderbank asked.

"Oh THAT would do no good. To Nanda. All the same," she continued, "it's an awfully superficial thing of you not to see that her dreariness — on which moreover I've set you right before — is a mere facial accident and doesn't correspond or, as they say, 'rhyme' to anything within her that might make it a little interesting. What I like it for is just that it's so funny in itself. Her low spirits are nothing more than her features. Her gloom, as you call it, is merely her broken nose."

"HAS she a broken nose?" Mr. Longdon demanded with an accent that for some reason touched in the others the spring of laughter.

"Has Nanda never mentioned it?" Mrs. Brook profited by this gaiety to ask.

"That's the discretion you just spoke of," said the Duchess. "Only I should have expected from the cause you refer to rather the comic effect."

"Mrs. Grendon's broken nose, sir," Vanderbank explained to Mr. Longdon, "is only the kinder way taken by these ladies to speak of Mrs. Grendon's broken heart. You must know all about that."

"Oh yes — ALL." Mr. Longdon spoke very simply, with the consequence this time, on the part of his companions, of a silence of some minutes, which he himself had at last to break. "Mr. Grendon doesn't like her." The addition of these words apparently made the difference — as if they constituted a fresh link with the irresistible comedy of things. That he was unexpectedly diverting was, however, no check to Mr. Longdon's delivering his full thought. "Very horrid of two sisters to be both, in their marriages, so wretched."

"Ah but Tishy, I maintain," Mrs. Brook returned, "ISN'T wretched at all. If I were satisfied that she's really so I'd never let Nanda come to her."

"That's the most extraordinary doctrine, love," the Duchess interposed. "When you're satisfied a woman's 'really' poor you never give her a crust?"

"Do you call Nanda a crust, Duchess?" Vanderbank amusedly asked.

"She's all at any rate, apparently, just now, that poor Tishy has to live on."

"You're severe then," the young man said, "on our dinner of to-night."

"Oh Jane," Mrs. Brook declared, "is never severe: she's only uncontrollably witty. It's only Tishy moreover who gives out that her husband doesn't like her. HE, poor man, doesn't say anything of the sort."

"Yes, but, after all, you know" — Vanderbank just put it to her— "where the deuce, all the while, IS he?"

"Heaven forbid," the Duchess remarked, "that we should too rashly ascertain."

"There it is — exactly," Mr. Longdon subjoined.

He had once more his success of hilarity, though not indeed to the injury of the Duchess's next word. "It's Nanda, you know, who speaks, and loud enough, for Harry Grendon's dislikes."

"That's easy for her," Mrs. Brook declared, "when she herself isn't one of them."

"She isn't surely one of anybody's," Mr. Longdon gravely observed.

Mrs. Brook gazed across at him. "You ARE too dear! But I've none the less a crow to pick with you."

Mr. Longdon returned her look, but returned it somehow to Van. "You frighten me, you know, out of my wits."

"*I* do?" said Vanderbank.

Mr. Longdon just hesitated. "Yes."

"It must be the sacred terror," Mrs. Brook suggested to Van, "that Mitchy so often speaks of. I'M not trying with you," she went on to Mr. Longdon, "for anything of that kind, but only for the short half-hour in private that I think you won't for the world grant me. Nothing will induce you to find yourself alone with me."

"Why what on earth," Vanderbank asked, "do you suspect him of supposing you want to do?"

"Oh it isn't THAT," Mrs. Brook sadly said.

"It isn't what?" laughed the Duchess.

"That he fears I may want in any way to — what do you call it? — make up to him." She spoke as if she only wished it had been. "He has a deeper thought."

"Well then what in goodness is it?" the Duchess pressed.

Mr. Longdon had said nothing more, but Mrs. Brook preferred none the less to treat the question as between themselves. She WAS, as the others said, wonderful. "You can't help thinking me" — she spoke to him straight— "rather tortuous." The pause she thus momentarily produced was so intense as to give a sharpness that was almost vulgar to the little "Oh!" by which it was presently broken and the source of which neither of her three companions could afterwards in the least have named. Neither would have endeavoured to fix an infelicity of which each doubtless had been but too capable. "It's only as a mother," she added, "that I want my chance."

But the Duchess was at this again in the breach. "Take it, for mercy's sake then, my dear, over Harold, who's an example to Nanda herself in the way that, behind the piano there, he's keeping it up with Lady Fanny."

If this had been a herring that, in the interest of peace, the Duchess had wished to draw across the scent, it could scarce have been more effective. Mrs. Brook, whose position had made just the difference that she lost the view of the other side of the piano, took a slight but immediate stretch. "IS Harold with Lady Fanny?"

"You ask it, my dear child," said the Duchess, "as if it were too grand to be believed. It's the note of eagerness," she went on for Mr. Longdon's benefit— "it's almost the note of hope: one of those that ces messieurs, that we all in fact delight in and find so matchless. She desires for Harold the highest advantages."

"Well then," declared Vanderbank, who had achieved a glimpse, "he's clearly having them. It brings home to one his success."

"His success is true," Mrs. Brook insisted. "How he does it I don't know."

"Oh DON'T you?" trumpeted the Duchess.

"He's amazing," Mrs. Brook pursued. "I watch — I hold my breath. But I'm bound to say also I rather admire. He somehow amuses them."

"She's as pleased as Punch," said the Duchess.

"Those great calm women — they like slighter creatures."

"The great calm whales," the Duchess laughed, "swallow the little fishes."

"Oh my dear," Mrs. Brook returned, "Harold can be tasted, if you like—"

"If *I* like?" the Duchess parenthetically jeered. "Thank you, love!"

"But he can't, I think, be eaten. It all works out," Mrs. Brook expounded, "to the highest end. If Lady Fanny's amused she'll be quiet."

"Bless me," cried the Duchess, "of all the immoral speeches — ! I put it to you, Longdon. Does she mean" — she appealed to their friend— "that if she commits murder she won't commit anything else?"

"Oh it won't be murder," said Mrs. Brook. "I mean that if Harold, in one way and another, keeps her along, she won't get off."

“Off where?” Mr. Longdon risked.

Vanderbank immediately informed him. “To one of the smaller Italian towns. Don’t you know?”

“Oh yes. Like — who is it? I forget.”

“Anna Karenine? You know about Anna?”

“Nanda,” said the Duchess, “has told him. But I thought,” she went on to Mrs. Brook, “that Lady Fanny, by this time, MUST have gone.”

“Petherton then,” Mrs. Brook returned, “doesn’t keep you au courant?”

The Duchess blandly wondered. “I seem to remember he had positively said so. And that she had come back.”

“Because this looks so like a fresh start? No. WE know. You assume besides,” Mrs. Brook asked, “that Mr. Cashmore would have received her again?”

The Duchess fixed a little that gentleman and his actual companion. “What will you have? He mightn’t have noticed.”

“Oh you’re out of step, Duchess,” Vanderbank said. “We used all to march abreast, but we’re falling to pieces. It’s all, saving your presence, Mitchy’s marriage.”

“Ah,” Mrs. Brook concurred, “how thoroughly I feel that! Oh I knew. The spell’s broken; the harp has lost a string. We’re not the same thing. HE’S not the same thing.”

“Frankly, my dear,” the Duchess answered, “I don’t think that you personally are either.”

“Oh as for that — which is what matters least — we shall perhaps see.” With which Mrs. Brook turned again to Mr. Longdon. “I haven’t explained to you what I meant just now. We want Nanda.”

Mr. Longdon stared. “At home again?”

“In her little old nook. You must give her back.”

“Do you mean altogether?”

“Ah that will be for you in a manner to arrange. But you’ve had her practically these five months, and with no desire to be unreasonable we yet have our natural feelings.”

This interchange, to which circumstances somehow gave a high effect of suddenness and strangeness, was listened to by the others in a quick silence that was like the sense of a blast of cold air, though with the difference between the spectators that Vanderbank attached his eyes hard to Mrs. Brook and that the Duchess looked as straight at Mr. Longdon, to whom clearly she wished to convey that if he had wondered a short time before how Mrs. Brook would do it he must now be quite at his ease. He indulged in fact, after this lady’s last words, in a pause that might have signified some of the fulness of a new light. He only said very quietly: “I thought you liked it.”

At this his neighbour broke in. “The care you take of the child? They DO!” The Duchess, as she spoke, became aware of the nearer presence of Edward Brookenham, who within a minute had come in from the other room; and her decision of character leaped forth in her quick signal to him. “Edward will tell you.” He was already before their semicircle. “DO you, dear,” she appealed, “want Nanda back from Mr. Longdon?”

Edward plainly could be trusted to feel in his quiet way that the oracle must be a match for the priestess. “‘Want’ her, Jane? We wouldn’t TAKE her.” And as if knowing quite what he was about he looked at his wife only after he had spoken.

IV

His reply had complete success, to which there could scarce have afterwards been a positive denial that some sound of amusement even from Mr. Longdon himself had in its degree contributed. Certain it was that Mrs. Brook found, as she exclaimed that her husband was always so awfully civil, just the right note of resigned understanding; whereupon he for a minute presented to them blankly enough his fine dead face. "'Civil' is just what I was afraid I wasn't. I mean, you know," he continued to Mr. Longdon, "that you really mustn't look to us to let you off — !"

"From a week or a day" — Mr. Longdon took him up— "of the time to which you consider I've pledged myself? My dear sir, please don't imagine it's for ME the Duchess appeals."

"It's from your wife, you delicious dull man," that lady elucidated. "If you wished to be stiff with our friend here you've really been so with HER; which comes, no doubt, from the absence between you of proper preconcerted action. You spoke without your cue."

"Oh!" said Edward Brookenham.

"That's it, Jane" — Mrs. Brook continued to take it beautifully. "We dressed to-day in a hurry and hadn't time for our usual rehearsal. Edward, when we dine out, generally brings three pocket-handkerchiefs and six jokes. I leave the management of the handkerchiefs to his own taste, but we mostly try together in advance to arrange a career for the other things. It's some charming light thing of my own that's supposed to give him the sign."

"Only sometimes he confounds" — Vanderbank helped her out— "your light and your heavy!" He had got up to make room for his host of so many occasions and, having forced him into the empty chair, now moved vaguely off to the quarter of the room occupied by Nanda and Mr. Cashmore.

"That's very well," the Duchess resumed, "but it doesn't at all clear you, cara mia, of the misdemeanour of setting up as a felt domestic need something of which Edward proves deeply unconscious. He has put his finger on Nanda's true interest. He doesn't care a bit how it would LOOK for you to want her."

"Don't you mean rather, Jane, how it looks for us NOT to want her?" Mrs. Brook amended with a detachment now complete. "Of course, dear old friend," she continued to Mr. Longdon, "she quite puts me with my back to the wall when she helps you to see — what you otherwise mightn't guess — that Edward and I work it out between us to show off as tender parents and yet to get from you everything you'll give. I do the sentimental and he the practical; so that we, after one fashion and another, deck ourselves in the glory of our sacrifice without forfeiting the 'keep' of our daughter. This must appeal to you as another useful illustration of what London manners have come to; unless indeed," Mrs. Brook prattled on, "it only strikes you still more — and to a degree that blinds you to its other possible bearings — as the last proof that I'm too tortuous for you to know what I'd be at!"

Mr. Longdon faced her, across his interval, with his original terror represented now only by such a lingering flush as might have formed a natural tribute to a brilliant scene. "I haven't the glimmering of an idea of what you'd be at. But please understand," he added, "that I don't at all refuse you the private half-hour you referred to a while since."

"Are you really willing to put the child up for the rest of the year?" Edward placidly demanded, speaking as if quite unaware that anything else had taken place.

His wife fixed her eyes on him. "The ingenuity of your companions, love, plays in the air like the lightning, but flashes round your head only, by good fortune, to leave it unscathed. Still, you have after all your own strange wit, and I'm not sure that any of ours ever compares with it. Only, confronted also with ours, how can poor Mr. Longdon really choose which of the two he'll meet?"

Poor Mr. Longdon now looked hard at Edward. "Oh Mr. Brookenham's, I feel, any day. It's even with YOU, I confess," he said to him, "that I'd rather have that private half-hour."

"Done!" Mrs. Brook declared. "I'll send him to you. But we HAVE, you know, as Van says, gone to pieces," she went on, twisting her pretty head and tossing it back over her shoulder to an auditor of whose approach to her from behind, though it was impossible she should have seen him, she had visibly within a minute become aware. "It's your marriage, Mitchy, that has darkened our old bright air, changed us more than we even yet know, and most grossly and horribly, my dear man, changed YOU. You steal up in a way that gives one the creeps, whereas in the good time that's gone you always burst in with music and song. Go

round where I can see you: I mayn't love you now, but at least, I suppose, I may look at you. Direct your energies," she pursued while Mitchy obeyed her, "as much as possible, please, against our uncanny chill. Pile on the fire and close up the ranks; this WAS our best hour, you know — and all the more that Tishy, I see, is getting rid of her superfluities. Here comes back old Van," she wound up, "vanquished, I judge, in the attempt to divert Nanda from her prey. Won't Nanda sit with poor US?" she asked of Vanderbank, who now, meeting Mitchy in range of the others, remained standing with him and as at her commands.

"I didn't of course ask her," the young man replied.

"Then what did you do?"

"I only took a little walk."

Mrs. Brook, on this, was woeful at Mitchy. "See then what we've come to. When did we ever 'walk' in YOUR time save as a distinct part of the effect of our good things? Please return to Nanda," she said to Vanderbank, "and tell her I particularly wish her to come in for this delightful evening's end."

"She's joining us of herself now," the Duchess noted, "and so's Mr. Cashmore and so's Tishy — VOYEZ! — who has kept on — (bless her little bare back!) — no one she oughtn't to keep. As nobody else will now arrive it would be quite cosey if she locked the door."

"But what on earth, my dear Jane," Mrs. Brook plaintively wondered, "are you proposing we should do?"

Mrs. Brook, in her apprehension, had looked expressively at their friends, but the eye of the Duchess wandered no further than Harold and Lady Fanny. "It would perhaps serve to keep that pair a little longer from escaping together."

Mrs. Brook took a pause no greater. "But wouldn't it be, as regards another pair, locking the stable-door after — what do you call it? Don't Petherton and Aggie appear already to have escaped together? Mitchy, man, where in the world's your wife?"

"I quite grant you," said the Duchess gaily, "that my niece is wherever Petherton is. This I'm sure of, for THERE'S a friendship, if you please, that has not been interrupted. Petherton's not gone, is he?" she asked in her turn of Mitchy.

But again before he could speak it was taken up. "Mitchy's silent, Mitchy's altered, Mitchy's queer!" Mrs. Brook proclaimed, while the new recruits to the circle, Tishy and Nanda and Mr. Cashmore, Lady Fanny and Harold too after a minute and on perceiving the movement of the others, ended by enlarging it, with mutual accommodation and aid, to a pleasant talkative ring in which the subject of their companion's demonstration, on a low ottoman and glaring in his odd way in almost all directions at once, formed the conspicuous attractive centre. Tishy was nearest Mr. Longdon, and Nanda, still flanked by Mr. Cashmore, between that gentleman and his wife, who had Harold on her other side. Edward Brookenham was neighboured by his son and by Vanderbank, who might easily have felt himself, in spite of their separation and given, as it happened, their places in the group, rather publicly confronted with Mr. Longdon. "Is his wife in the other room?" Mrs. Brook now put to Tishy.

Tishy, after a stare about, recovered the acuter consciousness to account for this guest. "Oh yes — she's playing with him."

"But with whom, dear?"

"Why, with Petherton. I thought you knew."

"Knew they're playing — ?" Mrs. Brook was almost Socratic.

"The Missus is regularly wound up," her husband meanwhile, without resonance, observed to Vanderbank.

"Brilliant indeed!" Vanderbank replied.

"But she's rather naughty, you know," Edward after a pause continued.

"Oh fiendish!" his interlocutor said with a short smothered laugh that might have represented for a spectator a sudden start at such a flash of analysis from such a quarter.

When Vanderbank's attention at any rate was free again their hostess, assisted to the transition, was describing the play, as she had called it, of the absentees. "She has hidden a book and he's trying to find it."

"Hide and seek? Why, isn't it innocent, Mitch!" Mrs. Brook exclaimed.

Mitchy, speaking for the first time, faced her with extravagant gloom. "Do you really think so?"

"That's HER innocence!" the Duchess laughed to him.

"And don't you suppose he has found it YET?" Mrs. Brook pursued earnestly to Tishy. "Isn't it something we might ALL play at if — ?" On which however, abruptly checking herself, she changed her note. "Nanda love, please go and invite them to join us."

Mitchy, at this, on his ottoman, wheeled straight round to the girl, who looked at him before speaking. “I’ll go if Mitchy tells me.”

“But if he does fear,” said her mother, “that there may be something in it — ?”

Mitchy jerked back to Mrs. Brook. “Well, you see, I don’t want to give way to my fear. Suppose there SHOULD be something! Let me not know.”

She dealt with him tenderly. “I see. You couldn’t — so soon — bear it.”

“Ah but, savez-vous,” the Duchess interposed with some majesty, “you’re horrid!”

“Let them alone,” Mitchy continued. “We don’t want at all events a general romp.”

“Oh I thought just that,” said Mrs. Brook, “was what the Duchess wished the door locked for! Perhaps moreover” — she returned to Tishy— “he hasn’t yet found the book.”

“He can’t,” Tishy said with simplicity.

“But why in the world — ?”

“You see she’s sitting on it” — Tishy felt, it was plain, the responsibility of explanation. “So that unless he pulls her off—”

“He can’t compass his desperate end? Ah I hope he won’t pull her off!” Mrs. Brook wonderfully murmured. It was said in a manner that stirred the circle, and unanimous laughter seemed already to have crowned her invocation, lately uttered, to the social spirit. “But what in the world,” she pursued, “is the book selected for such a position? I hope it’s not a very big one.”

“Oh aren’t the books that are sat upon,” Mr. Cashmore freely speculated, “as a matter of course the bad ones?”

“Not a bit as a matter of course,” Harold as freely replied to him. “They sit, all round, nowadays — I mean in the papers and places — on some awfully good stuff. Why I myself read books that I couldn’t — upon my honour I wouldn’t risk it! — read out to you here.”

“What a pity,” his father dropped with the special shade of dryness that was all Edward’s own, “what a pity you haven’t got one of your favourites to try on us!”

Harold looked about as if it might have been after all a happy thought. “Well, Nanda’s the only girl.”

“And one’s sister doesn’t count,” said the Duchess.

“It’s just because the thing’s bad,” Tishy resumed for Mrs. Brook’s more particular benefit, “that Lord Petherton’s trying to wrest it.”

Mrs. Brook’s pale interest deepened. “Then it’s a real hand-to-hand struggle?”

“He says she shan’t read it — she says she will.”

“Ah that’s because — isn’t it, Jane?” Mrs. Brook appealed— “he so long overlooked and advised her in those matters. Doesn’t he feel by this time — so awfully clever as he is — the extraordinary way she has come out?”

“‘By this time’?” Harold echoed. “Dearest mummy, you’re too sweet. It’s only about ten weeks — isn’t it, Mitch? You don’t mind my saying that, I hope,” he solicitously added.

Mitchy had his back to him and, bending it a little, sat with head dropped and knees pressing his hands together. “I don’t mind any one’s saying anything.”

“Lord, are you already past that?” Harold sociably laughed.

“He used to vibrate to everything. My dear man, what IS the matter?” Mrs. Brook demanded. “Does it all move too fast for you?”

“Mercy on us, what ARE you talking about? That’s what *I* want to know!” Mr. Cashmore vivaciously declared.

“Well, she HAS gone at a pace — if Mitchy doesn’t mind,” Harold interposed in the tone of tact and taste. “But then don’t they always — I mean when they’re like Aggie and they once get loose — go at a pace? That’s what *I* want to know. I don’t suppose mother did, nor Tishy, nor the Duchess,” he communicated to the rest; “but mother and Tishy and the Duchess, it strikes me, must either have been of the school that knew, don’t you know? a deuce of a deal before, or of the type that takes it all more quietly after.”

“I think a woman can only speak for herself. I took it all quietly enough both before and after,” said Mrs. Brook. Then she addressed to Mr. Cashmore with a small formal nod one of her lovely wan smiles. “What I’m talking about, s’il vous plait, is marriage.”

“I wonder if you know,” the Duchess broke out on this, “how silly you all sound! When did it ever, in any society that could call itself decently ‘good,’ NOT make a difference that an innocent young creature, a flower

tended and guarded, should find from one day to the other her whole consciousness changed? People pull long faces and look wonderful looks and punch each other, in your English fashion, in the sides, and say to each other in corners that my poor darling has 'come out.' Je crois bien, she has come out! I married her — I don't mind saying it now — exactly that she SHOULD come out, and I should be mightily ashamed of every one concerned if she hadn't. I didn't marry her, I give you to believe, that she should stay 'in,' and if any of you think to frighten Mitchy with it I imagine you'll do so as little as you frighten ME. If it has taken her a very short time — as Harold so vividly puts it — to which of you did I ever pretend, I should like to know, that it would take her a very long one? I dare say there are girls it would have taken longer, just as there are certainly others who wouldn't have required so much as an hour. It surely isn't news to you that if some young persons among us all are very stupid and others very wise, MY dear child was never either, but only perfectly bred and deliciously clever. Ah THAT — rather! If she's so clever that you don't know what to do with her it's scarcely HER fault. But add to it that Mitchy's very kind, and you have the whole thing. What more do you want?"

Mrs. Brook, who looked immensely struck, replied with the promptest sympathy, yet as if there might have been an alternative. "I don't think" — and her eyes appealed to the others— "that we want ANY more, do we? than the whole thing."

"Gracious, I should hope not!" her husband remarked as privately as before to Vanderbank. "Jane — for a mixed company — does go into it."

Vanderbank, for a minute and with a special short arrest, took in the circle. "Should you call us 'mixed'? There's only ONE girl."

Edward Brookenham glanced at his daughter. "Yes, but I wish there were more."

"DO you?" And Vanderbank's laugh at this odd view covered, for a little, the rest of the talk. But when he again began to follow no victory had yet been snatched.

It was Mrs. Brook naturally who rattled the standard. "When you say, dearest, that we don't know what to 'do' with Aggie's cleverness, do you quite allow for the way we bow down before it and worship it? I don't quite see what else we — in here — can do with it, even though we HAVE gathered that, just over there, Petherton's finding for it a different application. We can only each in our way do our best. Don't therefore succumb, Jane, to the delusive harm of a grievance. There would be nothing in it. You haven't got one. The beauty of the life that so many of us have so long led together" — and she showed that it was for Mr. Longdon she more particularly brought this out— "is precisely that nobody has ever had one. Nobody has dreamed of it — it would have been such a rough false note, a note of violence out of all keeping. Did YOU ever hear of one, Van? Did you, my poor Mitchy? But you see for yourselves," she wound up with a sigh and before either could answer, "how inferior we've become when we have even in our defence to assert such things."

Mitchy, who for a while past had sat gazing at the floor, now raised his good natural goggles and stretched his closed mouth to its widest. "Oh I think we're pretty good still!" he then replied.

Mrs. Brook indeed appeared, after a pause and addressing herself again to Tishy, to give a reluctant illustration of it, coming back as from an excursion of the shortest to the question momentarily dropped. "I'm bound to say — all the more you know — that I don't quite see what Aggie mayn't now read." Suddenly, however, her look at their informant took on an anxiety. "Is the book you speak of something VERY awful?"

Mrs. Grendon, with so much these past minutes to have made her so, was at last visibly more present. "That's what Lord Petherton says of it. From what he knows of the author."

"So that he wants to keep her — ?"

"Well, from trying it first. I think he wants to see if it's good for her."

"That's one of the most charming soins, I think," the Duchess said, "that a gentleman may render a young woman to whom he desires to be useful. I won't say that Petherton always knows how good a book may be, but I'd trust him any day to say how bad."

Mr. Longdon, who had sat throughout silent and still, quitted his seat at this and evidently in so doing gave Mrs. Brook as much occasion as she required. She also got up and her movement brought to her view at the door of the further room something that drew from her a quick exclamation. "He can tell us now then — for here they come!" Lord Petherton, arriving with animation and followed so swiftly by his young companion that she presented herself as pursuing him, shook triumphantly over his head a small volume in blue paper. There was a general movement at the sight of them, and by the time they had rejoined their friends the

company, pushing back seats and causing a variety of mute expression smoothly to circulate, was pretty well on its feet. “See — he HAS pulled her off!” said Mrs. Brook. “Little Aggie, to whom plenty of pearls were singularly becoming, met it as pleasant sympathy. Yes, and it was a REAL pull. But of course,” she continued with the prettiest humour and as if Mrs. Brook would quite understand, “from the moment one has a person’s nails, and almost his teeth, in one’s flesh — !”

Mrs. Brook’s sympathy passed, however, with no great ease from Aggie’s pearls to her other charms; fixing the former indeed so markedly that Harold had a quick word about it for Lady Fanny. “When poor mummy thinks, you know, that Nanda might have had them — !”

Lady Fanny’s attention, for that matter, had resisted them as little. “Well, I dare say that if I had wanted *I* might!”

“Lord — COULD you have stood him?” the young man returned. “But I believe women can stand anything!” he profoundly concluded. His mother meanwhile, recovering herself, had begun to ejaculate on the prints in Aggie’s arms, and he was then diverted from the sense of what he “personally,” as he would have said, couldn’t have stood, by a glance at Lord Petherton’s trophy, for which he made a prompt grab. “The bone of contention?” Lord Petherton had let it go and Harold remained arrested by the cover. “Why blest if it hasn’t Van’s name!”

“Van’s?” — his mother was near enough to effect her own snatch, after which she swiftly faced the proprietor of the volume. “Dear man, it’s the last thing you lent me! But I don’t think,” she added, turning to Tishy, “that I ever passed such a production on to YOU.”

“It was just seeing Mr. Van’s hand,” Aggie conscientiously explained, “that made me think one was free — !”

“But it isn’t Mr. Van’s hand!” — Mrs. Brook quite smiled at the error. She thrust the book straight at Mr. Longdon. “IS that Mr. Van’s hand?”

Holding the disputed object, which he had put on his nippers to glance at, he presently, without speaking, looked over these aids straight at Nanda, who looked as straight back at him. “It was I who wrote Mr. Van’s name.” The girl’s eyes were on Mr. Longdon, but her words as for the company. “I brought the book here from Buckingham Crescent and left it by accident in the other room.”

“By accident, my dear,” her mother replied, “I do quite hope. But what on earth did you bring it for? It’s too hideous.”

Nanda seemed to wonder. “Is it?” she murmured.

“Then you haven’t read it?”

She just hesitated. “One hardly knows now, I think, what is and what isn’t.”

“She brought it only for ME to read,” Tishy gravely interposed.

Mrs. Brook looked strange. “Nanda RECOMMENDED it?”

“Oh no — the contrary.” Tishy, as if scared by so much publicity, floundered a little. “She only told me—”

“The awful subject?” Mrs. Brook wailed.

There was so deepening an echo of the drollery of this last passage that it was a minute before Vanderbank could be heard saying: “The responsibility’s wholly mine for setting the beastly thing in motion. Still,” he added good-humouredly and as to minimise if not the cause at least the consequence, “I think I agree with Nanda that it’s no worse than anything else.”

Mrs. Brook had recovered the volume from Mr. Longdon’s relaxed hand and now, without another glance at it, held it behind her with an unusual air of firmness. “Oh how can you say that, my dear man, of anything so revolting?”

The discussion kept them for the instant well face to face. “Then did YOU read it?”

She debated, jerking the book into the nearest empty chair, where Mr. Cashmore quickly pounced on it. “Wasn’t it for that you brought it me?” she demanded. Yet before he could answer she again challenged her child. “Have you read this work, Nanda?”

“Yes mamma.”

“Oh I say!” cried Mr. Cashmore, hilarious and turning the leaves.

Mr. Longdon had by this time ceremoniously approached Tishy. “Good-night.”

BOOK NINTH. VANDERBANK

I

"I think you had better wait," Mrs. Brook said, "till I see if he has gone;" and on the arrival the next moment of the servants with the tea she was able to put her question. "Is Mr. Cashmore still with Miss Brookenham?"

"No, ma'am," the footman replied. "I let Mr. Cashmore out five minutes ago."

Vanderbank showed for the next short time by his behaviour what he felt at not yet being free to act on this; moving pointlessly about the room while the servants arranged the tea-table and taking no trouble to make, for appearance, any other talk. Mrs. Brook, on her side, took so little that the silence — which their temporary companions had all the effect of keeping up by conscious dawdling — became precisely one of those precious lights for the circle belowstairs which people fondly fancy they have not kindled when they have not spoken. But Vanderbank spoke again as soon as the door was closed. "Does he run in and out that way without even speaking to YOU?"

Mrs. Brook turned away from the fire that, late in May, was the only charm of the crude cold afternoon. "One would like to draw the curtains, wouldn't one? and gossip in the glow of the hearth."

"Oh 'gossip'!" Vanderbank wearily said as he came to her pretty table.

In the act of serving him she checked herself. "You wouldn't rather have it with HER?"

He balanced a moment. "Does she have a tea of her own?"

"Do you mean to say you don't know?" — Mrs. Brook asked it with surprise. "Such ignorance of what I do for her does tell, I think, the tale of how you've lately treated us."

"In not coming for so long?"

"For more weeks, for more months than I can count. Scarcely since — when was it? — the end of January, that night of Tishy's dinner."

"Yes, that awful night."

"Awful, you call it?"

"Awful."

"Well, the time without you," Mrs. Brook returned, "has been so bad that I'm afraid I've lost the impression of anything before." Then she offered the tea to his choice. "WILL you have it upstairs?"

He received the cup. "Yes, and here too." After which he said nothing again till, first pouring in milk to cool it, he had drunk his tea down. "That's not literally true, you know. I HAVE been in."

"Yes, but always with other people — you managed it somehow; the wrong ones. It hasn't counted."

"Ah in one way and another I think everything counts. And you forget I've dined."

"Oh — for once!"

"The once you asked me. So don't spoil the beauty of your own behaviour by mistimed reflexions. You've been, as usual, superior."

"Ah but there has been no beauty in it. There has been nothing," Mrs. Brook went on, "but bare bleak recognition, the curse of my hideous intelligence. We've fallen to pieces, and at least I'm not such a fool as not to have felt it in time. From the moment one did feel it why should one insist on vain forms? If YOU felt it, and were so ready to drop them, my part was what it has always been — to accept the inevitable. We shall never grow together again. The smash was too great."

Vanderbank for a little said nothing; then at last: "You ought to know how great!"

Whatever had happened her lovely look here survived it. "I?"

"The smash," he replied, "was indeed as complete, I think, as your intention. Each of the 'pieces' testifies to your success. Five minutes did it."

She appeared to wonder where he was going. "But surely not MY minutes. Where have you discovered that I made Mitchy's marriage?"

"Mitchy's marriage has nothing to do with it."

"I see." She had the old interest at least still at their service. "You think we might have survived that." A new thought of it seemed to glimmer. "I'm bound to say Mitchy's marriage promises elements."

"You did it that night at Mrs. Grendon's." He spoke as if he had not heard her. "It was a wonderful performance. You pulled us down — just closing with each of the great columns in its turn — as Samson pulled down the temple. I was at the time more or less bruised and buried and didn't in the agitation and confusion fully understand what had happened. But I understand now."

"Are you very sure?" Mrs. Brook earnestly asked.

"Well, I'm stupid compared with you, but you see I've taken my time. I've puzzled it out. I've lain awake on it: all the more that I've had to do it all myself — with the Mitchys in Italy and Greece. I've missed his aid."

"You'll have it now," Mrs. Brook kindly said. "They're coming back."

"And when do they arrive?"

"Any day, I believe."

"Has he written you?"

"No," said Mrs. Brook— "there it is. That's just the way we've fallen to pieces. But you'll of course have heard something."

"Never a word."

"Ah then it's complete."

Vanderbank thought a moment. "Not quite, is it? — I mean it won't be altogether unless he hasn't written to Nanda."

"Then HAS he?" — she was keen again.

"Oh I'm assuming. Don't YOU know?"

"How should I?"

This too he turned over. "Just as a consequence of your having, at Tishy's, so abruptly and wonderfully tackled the question that a few days later, as I afterwards gathered, was to be crowned with a measure of success not yet exhausted. Why, in other words — if it was to know so little about her and to get no nearer to her — did you bring about Nanda's return?"

There was a clear reason, her face said, if she could only remember it. "Why did I — ?" Then as catching a light: "Fancy your asking me — at this time of day!"

"Ah you HAVE noticed that I haven't asked before? However," Van promptly added, "I know well enough what you notice. Nanda hasn't mentioned to you whether or no she has heard?"

"Absolutely not. But you don't suppose, I take it, that it was to pry into her affairs I called her in."

Vanderbank, on this, lighted for the first time with a laugh. "'Called her in'? How I like your expressions!"

"I do then, in spite of all," she eagerly asked, "remind you a little of the bon temps? Ah," she sighed, "I don't say anything good now. But of course I see Jane — though not so often either. It's from Jane I've heard of what she calls her 'young things.' It seems so odd to think of Mitchy as a young thing. He's as old as all time, and his wife, who the other day was about six, is now practically about forty. And I also saw Petherton," Mrs. Brook added, "on his return."

"His return from where?"

"Why he was with them at Corfu, Malta, Cyprus — I don't know where; yachting, spending Mitchy's money, 'larking,' he called it — I don't know what. He was with them for weeks."

"Till Jane, you mean, called him in?"

"I think it must have been that."

"Well, that's better," said Van, "than if Mitchy had had to call him out."

"Oh Mitchy — !" Mrs. Brook comprehensively sounded.

Her visitor quite assented. "Isn't he amazing?"

"Unique."

He had a short pause. "But what's she up to?"

It was apparently for Mrs. Brook a question of such variety of application that she brought out experimentally: "Jane?"

"Dear no. I think we've fathomed 'Jane,' haven't we?"

"Well," mused Mrs. Brook, "I'm by no means sure I have. Just of late I've had a new sense!"

"Yes, of what now?" Van amusedly put it as she held the note.

"Oh of depths below depths. But poor Jane — of course after all she's human. She's beside herself with one thing and another, but she can't in any consistency show it. She took her stand so on having with Petherton's aid formed Aggie for a femme charmante—"

"That it's too late to cry out that Petherton's aid can now be dispensed with? Do you mean then that he IS such a brute that after all Mitchy has done for him — ?" Vanderbank, at the rising image, pulled up in easy disgust.

"I think him quite capable of considering with a magnificent insolence of selfishness that what Mitchy has

MOST done will have been to make Aggie accessible in a way that — for decency and delicacy of course, things on which Petherton highly prides himself — she could naturally not be as a girl. Her marriage has simplified it."

Vanderbank took it all in. "'Accessible' is good!"

"Then — which was what I intended just now — Aggie has already become so — ?"

Mrs. Brook, however, could as yet in fairness only wonder. "That's just what I'm dying to see."

Her companion smiled at it. "'Even in our ashes live their wonted fires'! But what do you make, in such a box, of poor Mitchy himself? His marriage can scarcely to such an extent have simplified HIM."

It was something, none the less, that Mrs. Brook had to weigh. "I don't know. I give it up. The thing was of a strangeness!"

Her friend also paused, and it was as if for a little, on either side of a gate on which they might have had their elbows, they remained looking at each other over it and over what was unsaid between them. "It WAS 'rum'!" he at last merely dropped.

It was scarce for Mrs. Brook, all the same — she seemed to feel after a moment — to surround the matter with an excess of silence.

"He did what a man does — especially in that business — when he doesn't do what he wants."

"Do you mean what somebody else wanted?"

"Well, what he himself DIDN'T. And if he's unhappy," she went on, "he'll know whom to pitch into."

"Ah," said Vanderbank, "even if he is he won't be the man to what you might call 'vent' it on her. He'll seek compensations elsewhere and won't mind any ridicule — !"

"Whom are you speaking of as 'her'?" Mrs. Brook asked as on feeling that something in her face had made him stop. "I wasn't referring," she explained, "to his wife."

"Oh!" said Vanderbank.

"Aggie doesn't matter," she went on.

"Oh!" he repeated. "You meant the Duchess?" he then threw off.

"Don't be silly!" she rejoined. "He MAY not become unhappy — God grant NOT!" she developed. "But if he does he'll take it out of Nanda."

Van appeared to challenge this. "'Take it out' of her?"

"Well, want to know, as some American asked me the other day of somebody, what she's 'going to do' about it."

Vanderbank, who had remained on his feet, stood still at this for a longer time than at anything yet. "But what CAN she 'do' — ?"

"That's again just what I'm curious to see." Mrs. Brook then spoke with a glance at the clock. "But if you don't go up to her — !"

"My notion of seeing her alone may be defeated by her coming down on learning that I'm here?" He had taken out his watch. "I'll go in a moment. But, as a light on that danger, would YOU, in the circumstances, come down?"

Mrs. Brook, however, could for light only look darkness. "Oh you don't love ME!"

Vanderbank, still with his watch, stared then as an alternative at the fire. "You haven't yet told me you know, if Mr. Cashmore now comes EVERY day."

"My dear man, how can I say? You've just your occasion to find out."

"From HER, you mean?"

Mrs. Brook hesitated. "Unless you prefer the footman. Must I again remind you that, with her own sitting-room and one of the men, in addition to her maid, wholly at her orders, her independence is ideal?"

Vanderbank, who appeared to have been timing himself, put up his watch. "I'm bound to say then that with separations so established I understand less than ever your unforgettable explosion."

"Ah you come back to that?" she wearily asked. "And you find it, with all you've to think about, unforgettable?"

"Oh but there was a wild light in your eye — !"

"Well," Mrs. Brook said, "you see it now quite gone out." She had spoken more sadly than sharply, but her impatience had the next moment a flicker. "I called Nanda in because I wanted to."

"Precisely; but what I don't make out, you see, is what you've since gained by it."

"You mean she only hates me the more?"

Van's impatience, in the movement with which he turned from her, had a flare still sharper. "You know I'm incapable of meaning anything of the sort."

She waited a minute while his back was presented. "I sometimes think in effect that you're incapable of anything straightforward."

Vanderbank's movement had not been to the door, but he almost reached it after giving her, on this, a hard look. He then stopped short, however, to stare an instant still more fixedly into the hat he held in his hand; the consequence of which in turn was that he the next minute stood again before her chair. "Don't you call it straightforward of me just not to have come for so long?"

She had again to take time to say. "Is that an allusion to what — by the loss of your beautiful presence — I've failed to 'gain'? I dare say at any rate" — she gave him no time to reply— "that you feel you're quite as straightforward as I and that we're neither of us creatures of mere rash impulse. There was a time in fact, wasn't there? when we rather enjoyed each other's dim depths. If I wanted to fawn on you," she went on, "I might say that, with such a comrade in obliquity to wind and double about with, I'd risk losing myself in the mine. But why retort or recriminate? Let us not, for God's sake, be vulgar — we haven't yet, bad as it is, come to THAT. I CAN be, no doubt — I some day MUST be: I feel it looming at me out of the awful future as an inevitable fate. But let it be for when I'm old and horrible; not an hour before. I do want to live a little even yet. So you ought to let me off easily — even as I let you."

"Oh I know," said Vanderbank handsomely, "that there are things you don't put to me! You show a tact!"

"There it is. And I like much better," Mrs. Brook went on, "our speaking of it as delicacy than as duplicity. If you understand, it's so much saved."

"What I always understand more than anything else," he returned, "is the general truth that you're prodigious."

It was perhaps a little as relapse from tension that she had nothing against that. "As for instance when it WOULD be so easy — !"

"Yes, to take up what lies there, you yet so splendidly abstain."

"You literally press upon me my opportunity? It's YOU who are splendid!" she rather strangely laughed.

"Don't you at least want to say," he went on with a slight flush, "what you MOST obviously and naturally might?"

Appealed to on the question of underlying desire, Mrs. Brook went through the decent form of appearing to try to give it the benefit of any doubt. "Don't I want, you mean, to find out before you go up what YOU want? Shall you be too disappointed," she asked, "if I say that, since I shall probably learn, as we used to be told as children, 'all in good time,' I can wait till the light comes out of itself?"

Vanderbank still lingered. "You ARE deep!"

"You've only to be deeper."

"That's easy to say. I'm afraid at any rate you won't think I am," he pursued after a pause, "if I ask you what in the world — since Harold does keep Lady Fanny so quiet — Cashmore still requires Nanda's direction for."

"Ah find out!" said Mrs. Brook.

"Isn't Mrs. Donner quite shelved?"

"Find out," she repeated.

Vanderbank had reached the door and had his hand on the latch, but there was still something else. "You scarce suppose, I imagine, that she has come to like him 'for himself?"

"Find out!" And Mrs. Brook, who was now on her feet, turned away. He watched her a moment more, then checked himself and left her.

II

She remained alone ten minutes, at the end of which her reflexions would have been seen to be deep — were interrupted by the entrance of her husband. The interruption was indeed not so great as if the couple had not met, as they almost invariably met, in silence: she took at all events, to begin with, no more account of his presence than to hand him a cup of tea accompanied with nothing but cream and sugar. Her having no word for him, however, committed her no more to implying that he had come in only for his refreshment than it would have committed her to say: "Here it is, Edward dear — just as you like it; so take it and sit down and be quiet." No spectator worth his salt could have seen them more than a little together without feeling how everything that, under his eyes or not, she either did or omitted, rested on a profound acquaintance with his ways. They formed, Edward's ways, a chapter by themselves, of which Mrs. Brook was completely mistress and in respect to which the only drawback was that a part of her credit was by the nature of the case predestined to remain obscure. So many of them were so queer that no one but she COULD know them, and know thereby into what crannies her reckoning had to penetrate. It was one of them for instance that if he was often most silent when most primed with matter, so when he had nothing to say he was always silent too — a peculiarity misleading, until mastered, for a lady who could have allowed in the latter case for almost any variety of remark. "What do you think," he said at last, "of his turning up to-day?"

"Of old Van's?"

"Oh has HE turned up?"

"Half an hour ago, and asking almost in his first breath for Nanda. I sent him up to her and he's with her now." If Edward had his ways she had also some of her own; one of which, in talk with him, if talk it could be called, was never to produce anything till the need was marked. She had thus a card or two always in reserve, for it was her theory that she never knew what might happen. It nevertheless did occur that he sometimes went, as she would have called it, one better.

"He's not with her now. I've just been with her."

"Then he didn't go up?" Mrs. Brook was immensely interested. "He left me, you know, to do so."

"Know — how should I know? I left her five minutes ago."

"Then he went out without seeing her." Mrs. Brook took it in. "He changed his mind out there on the stairs."

"Well," said Edward, "it won't be the first mind that has been changed there. It's about the only thing a man can change."

"Do you refer particularly to MY stairs?" she asked with her whimsical woe. But meanwhile she had taken it in. "Then whom were you speaking of?"

"Mr. Longdon's coming to tea with her. She has had a note."

"But when did he come to town?"

"Last night, I believe. The note, an hour or two ago, announced him — brought by hand and hoping she'd be at home."

Mrs. Brook thought again. "I'm glad she is. He's too sweet. By hand! — it must have been so he sent them to mamma. He wouldn't for the world wire."

"Oh Nanda has often wired to HIM," her father returned.

"Then she ought to be ashamed of herself. But how," said Mrs. Brook, "do you know?"

"Oh I know when we're in a thing like this."

"Yet you complain of her want of intimacy with you! It turns out that you're as thick as thieves."

Edward looked at this charge as he looked at all old friends, without a sign — to call a sign — of recognition. "I don't know of whose want of intimacy with me I've ever complained. There isn't much more of it, that I can see, that any of them could put on. What do you suppose I'd have them do? If I on my side don't get very far I may have alluded to THAT."

"Oh but you do," Mrs. Brook declared. "You think you don't, but you get very far indeed. You're always, as I said just now, bringing out something that you've got somewhere."

"Yes, and seeing you flare up at it. What I bring out is only what they tell me."

This limitation offered, however, for Mrs. Brook no difficulty. "Ah but it seems to me that with the things people nowadays tell one — ! What more do you want?"

"Well" — and Edward from his chair regarded the fire a while— "the difference must be in what they tell YOU."

"Things that are better?"

"Yes — worse. I dare say," he went on, "what I give them—"

"Isn't as bad as what I do? Oh we must each do our best. But when I hear from you," Mrs. Brook pursued, "that Nanda had ever permitted herself anything so dreadful as to wire to him, it comes over me afresh that *I* would have been the perfect one to deal with him if his detestation of me hadn't prevented." She was by this time also — but on her feet — before the fire, into which, like her husband, she gazed. "*I* would never have wired. I'd have gone in for little delicacies and odd things she has never thought of."

"Oh she doesn't go in for what you do," Edward assented.

"She's as bleak as a chimney-top when the fire's out, and if it hadn't been after all for mamma — !" And she lost herself again in the reasons of things.

Her husband's silence seemed to mark for an instant a deference to her allusion, but there was a limit even to this combination. "You make your mother, I think, keep it up pretty well. But if she HADN'T as you say, done so — ?"

"Why we shouldn't have been anywhere."

"Well, where are we now? That's what *I* want to know."

Following her own train she had at first no heed for his question. "Without his hatred he would have liked me." But she came back with a sigh to the actual. "No matter. We must deal with what we've got."

"What HAVE we got?" Edward continued.

Again with no ear for his question his wife turned away, only however, after taking a few vague steps, to approach him with new decision. "If Mr. Longdon's due will you do me a favour? Will you go back to Nanda — before he arrives — and let her know, though not of course as from ME, that Van has been here half an hour, has had it put well before him that she's up there and at liberty, and has left the house without seeing her?"

Edward Brookenham made no motion. "You don't like better to do it yourself?"

"If I liked better," said Mrs. Brook, "I'd have already done it. The way to make it not come from me is surely not for me to give it to her. Besides, I want to be here to receive him first."

"Then can't she know it afterwards?"

"After Mr. Longdon has gone? The whole point is that she should know it in time to let HIM know it."

Edward still communed with the fire. "And what's the point of THAT?" Her impatience, which visibly increased, carried her away again, and by the time she reached the window he had launched another question. "Are you in such a hurry she should know that Van doesn't want her?"

"What do you call a hurry when I've waited nearly a year? Nanda may know or not as she likes — may know whenever: if she doesn't know pretty well by this time she's too stupid for it to matter. My only pressure's for Mr. Longdon. She'll have it there for him when he arrives."

"You mean she'll make haste to tell him?"

Mrs. Brook raised her eyes a moment to some upper immensity. "She'll mention it."

Her husband on the other hand, his legs outstretched, looked straight at the toes of his boots. "Are you very sure?" Then as he remained without an answer: "Why should she if he hasn't told HER?"

"Of the way I so long ago let you know that he had put the matter to Van? It's not out between them in words, no doubt; but I fancy that for things to pass they've not to dot their i's quite so much, my dear, as we two. Without a syllable said to her she's yet aware in every fibre of her little being of what has taken place."

Edward gave a still longer space to taking this in. "Poor little thing!"

"Does she strike you as so poor," Mrs. Brook asked, "with so awfully much done for her?"

"Done by whom?"

It was as if she had not heard the question that she spoke again. "She has got what every woman, young or old, wants."

"Really?"

Edward's tone was of wonder, but she simply went on: "She has got a man of her own."

"Well, but if he's the wrong one?"

"Do you call Mr. Longdon so very wrong? I wish," she declared with a strange sigh, "that *I* had had a Mr. Longdon!"

"I wish very much you had. I wouldn't have taken it like Van."

"Oh it took Van," Mrs. Brook replied, "to put THEM where they are."

"But where ARE they? That's exactly it. In these three months, for instance," Edward demanded, "how has their connexion profited?"

Mrs. Brook turned it over. "Profited which?"

"Well, one cares most for one's child."

"Then she has become for him what we've most hoped her to be — an object of compassion still more marked."

"Is that what you've hoped her to be?" Mrs. Brook was obviously so lucid for herself that her renewed expression of impatience had plenty of point. "How can you ask after seeing what I did—"

"That night at Mrs. Grendon's? Well, it's the first time I HAVE asked it."

Mrs. Brook had a silence more pregnant. "It's for being with US that he pities her."

Edward thought. "With me too?"

"Not so much — but still you help."

"I thought you thought I didn't — that night."

"At Tishy's? Oh you didn't matter," said Mrs. Brook. "Everything, every one helps. Harold distinctly" — she seemed to figure it all out— "and even the poor children, I dare say, a little. Oh but every one" — she warmed to the vision— "it's perfect. Jane immensely, par example. Almost all the others who come to the house. Cashmore, Carrie, Tishy, Fanny — bless their hearts all! — each in their degree."

Edward Brookenham had under the influence of this demonstration gradually risen from his seat, and as his wife approached that part of her process which might be expected to furnish the proof he placed himself before her with his back to the fire. "And Mitchy, I suppose?"

But he was out. "No. Mitchy's different."

He wondered. "Different?"

"Not a help. Quite a drawback." Then as his face told how these WERE involutions, "You needn't understand, but you can believe me," she added. "The one who does most is of course Van himself." It was a statement by which his failure to apprehend was not diminished, and she completed her operation. "By not liking her."

Edward's gloom, on this, was not quite blankness, yet it was dense. "Do you like his not liking her?"

"Dear no. No better than HE does."

"And he doesn't — ?"

"Oh he hates it."

"Of course I haven't asked him," Edward appeared to say more to himself than to his wife.

"And of course I haven't," she returned — not at all in this case, plainly, for herself. "But I know it. He'd like her if he could, but he can't. That," Mrs. Brook wound up, "is what makes it sure."

There was at last in Edward's gravity a positive pathos. "Sure he won't propose?"

"Sure Mr. Longdon won't now throw her over."

"Of course if it IS sure—"

"Well?"

"Why, it is. But of course if it isn't—"

"Well?"

"Why, she won't have anything. Anything but US," he continued to reflect. "Unless, you know, you're working it on a certainty — !"

"That's just what I AM working it on. I did nothing till I knew I was safe."

"'Safe'?" he ambiguously echoed while on this their eyes met longer.

"Safe. I knew he'd stick."

"But how did you know Van wouldn't?"

"No matter 'how' — but better still. He hasn't stuck." She said it very simply, but she turned away from him.

His eyes for a little followed her. "We don't KNOW, after all, the old boy's means."

"I don't know what you mean by 'we' don't. Nanda does."

"But where's the support if she doesn't tell us?"

Mrs. Brook, who had faced about, again turned from him. "I hope you don't forget," she remarked with

superiority, “that we don’t ask her.”

“YOU don’t?” Edward gloomed.

“Never. But I trust her.”

“Yes,” he mused afresh, “one must trust one’s child. Does Van?” he then enquired.

“Does he trust her?”

“Does he know anything of the general figure?”

She hesitated. “Everything. It’s high.”

“He has told you so?”

Mrs. Brook, supremely impatient now, seemed to demur even to the question. “We ask HIM even less.”

“Then how do we know?”

She was weary of explaining. “Because that’s just why he hates it.”

There was no end however, apparently, to what Edward could take. “But hates what?”

“Why, not liking her.”

Edward kept his back to the fire and his dead eyes on the cornice and the ceiling. “I shouldn’t think it would be so difficult.”

“Well, you see it isn’t. Mr. Longdon can manage it.”

“I don’t see what the devil’s the matter with her,” he coldly continued.

“Ah that may not prevent — ! It’s fortunately the source at any rate of half Mr. Longdon’s interest.”

“But what the hell IS it?” he drearily demanded.

She faltered a little, but she brought it out. “It’s ME.”

“And what’s the matter with ‘you’?”

She made, at this, a movement that drew his eyes to her own, and for a moment she dimly smiled at him. “That’s the nicest thing you ever said to me. But ever, EVER, you know.”

“Is it?” She had her hand on his sleeve, and he looked almost awkward.

“Quite the very nicest. Consider that fact well and even if you only said it by accident don’t be funny — as you know you sometimes CAN be — and take it back. It’s all right. It’s charming, isn’t it? when our troubles bring us more together. Now go up to her.”

Edward kept a queer face, into which this succession of remarks introduced no light, but he finally moved, and it was only when he had almost reached the door that he stopped again. “Of course you know he has sent her no end of books.”

“Mr. Longdon — of late? Oh yes, a deluge, so that her room looks like a bookseller’s back shop; and all, in the loveliest bindings, the most standard English works. I not only know it, naturally, but I know — what you don’t — why.”

“‘Why’?” Edward echoed. “Why but that — unless he should send her money — it’s about the only kindness he can show her at a distance?”

Mrs. Brook hesitated; then with a little suppressed sigh: “That’s it!”

But it still held him. “And perhaps he does send her money.”

“No. Not now.”

Edward lingered. “Then is he taking it out — ?”

“In books only?” It was wonderful — with its effect on him now visible — how she possessed her subject. “Yes, that’s his delicacy — for the present.”

“And you’re not afraid for the future — ?”

“Of his considering that the books will have worked it off? No. They’re thrown in.”

Just perceptibly cheered he reached the door, where, however, he had another pause. “You don’t think I had better see Van?”

She stared. “What for?”

“Why, to ask what the devil he means.”

“If you should do anything so hideously vulgar,” she instantly replied, “I’d leave your house the next hour. Do you expect,” she asked, “to be able to force your child down his throat?”

He was clearly not prepared with an account of his expectations, but he had a general memory that imposed itself. “Then why in the world did he make up to us?”

“He didn’t. We made up to HIM.”

“But why in the world — ?”

“Well,” said Mrs. Brook, really to finish, “we were in love with him.”

“Oh!” Edward jerked. He had by this time opened the door, and the sound was partly the effect of the disclosure of a servant preceding a visitor. His greeting of the visitor before edging past and away was, however, of the briefest; it might have implied that they had met but yesterday. “How d’ye do, Mitchy? — At home? Oh rather!”

III

Very different was Mrs. Brook's welcome of the restored wanderer to whom, in a brief space, she addressed every expression of surprise and delight, though marking indeed at last, as a qualification of these things, her regret that he declined to partake of her tea or to allow her to make him what she called "snug for a talk" in his customary corner of her sofa. He pleaded frankly agitation and embarrassment, reminded her even that he was awfully shy and that after separations, complications, whatever might at any time happen, he was conscious of the dust that had settled on intercourse and that he couldn't blow away in a single breath. She was only, according to her nature, to indulge him if, while he walked about and changed his place, he came to the surface but in patches and pieces. There was so much he wanted to know that — well, as they had arrived only the night before, she could judge. There was knowledge, it became clear, that Mrs. Brook almost equally craved, so that it even looked at first as if, on either side, confidence might be choked by curiosity. This disaster was finally barred by the fact that the spirit of enquiry found for Mitchy material that was comparatively plastic. That was after all apparent enough when at the end of a few vain passes he brought out sociably: "Well, has he done it?"

Still indeed there was something in Mrs. Brook's face that seemed to reply "Oh come — don't rush it, you know!" and something in the movement with which she turned away that described the state of their question as by no means so simple as that. On his refusal of tea she had rung for the removal of the table, and the bell was at this moment answered by the two men. Little ensued then, for some minutes, while the servants were present; she spoke only as the butler was about to close the door. "If Mr. Longdon presently comes show him into Mr. Brookenham's room if Mr. Brookenham isn't there. If he is show him into the dining-room and in either case let me immediately know."

The man waited expressionless. "And in case of his asking for Miss Brookenham — ?"

"He won't!" she replied with a sharpness before which her interlocutor retired. "He will!" she then added in quite another tone to Mitchy. "That is, you know, he perfectly MAY. But oh the subtlety of servants!" she sighed.

Mitchy was now all there. "Mr. Longdon's in town then?"

"For the first time since you went away. He's to call this afternoon."

"And you want to see him alone?"

Mrs. Brook thought. "I don't think I want to see him at all."

"Then your keeping him below — ?"

"Is so that he shan't burst in till I know. It's YOU, my dear, I want to see."

Mitchy glared about. "Well, don't take it ill if, in return for that, I say I myself want to see every one. I could have done even just now with a little more of Edward."

Mrs. Brook, in her own manner and with a slow headshake, looked lovely. "*I* couldn't." Then she puzzled it out with a pause. "It even does come over me that if you don't mind — !"

"What, my dear woman," said Mitchy encouragingly, "did I EVER mind? I assure you," he laughed, "I haven't come back to begin!"

At this, suddenly dropping everything else, she laid her hand on him. "Mitchy love, ARE you happy?"

So for a moment they stood confronted. "Not perhaps as YOU would have tried to make me."

"Well, you've still GOT me, you know."

"Oh," said Mitchy, "I've got a great deal. How, if I really look at it, can a man of my peculiar nature — it IS, you know, awfully peculiar — NOT be happy? Think, if one is driven to it for instance, of the breadth of my sympathies."

Mrs. Brook, as a result of thinking, appeared for a little to demur. "Yes — but one mustn't be too much driven to it. It's by one's sympathies that one suffers. If you should do that I couldn't bear it."

She clearly evoked for Mitchy a definite image. "It WOULD be funny, wouldn't it? But you wouldn't have to. I'd go off and do it alone somewhere — in a dark room, I think, or on a desert island; at any rate where nobody should see. Where's the harm moreover," he went on, "of any suffering that doesn't bore one, as I'm sure, however much its outer aspect might amuse some others, mine wouldn't bore me? What I should do in my desert island or my dark room, I feel, would be just to dance about with the thrill of it — which is exactly the exhibition of ludicrous gambols that I would fain have arranged to spare you. I assure you, dear Mrs.

Brook," he wound up, "that I'm not in the least bored now. Everything's so interesting."

"You're beautiful!" she vaguely interposed.

But he pursued without heeding: "Was perhaps what you had in your head that *I* should see him — ?"

She came back but slowly, however, to the moment. "Mr. Longdon? Well, yes. You know he can't bear ME—"

"Yes, yes" — Mitchy was almost eager.

It had already sent her off again. "You're too lovely. You HAVE come back the same. It seemed to me," she after an instant explained, "that I wanted him to be seen—"

"Without inconvenience, as it were, either to himself or to you? Then," said Mitchy, who visibly felt that he had taken her up successfully, "it strikes me that I'm absolutely your man. It's delicious to come back to a use."

But she was much more dim about it. "Oh what you've come back to — !"

"It's just what I'm trying to get at. Van is still then where I left him?"

She was just silent. "Did you really believe he would move?"

Mitchy took a few turns, speaking almost with his back presented. "Well, with all the reasons — !" After which, while she watched him, he was before her again with a question. "It's utterly off?"

"When was it ever really on?"

"Oh I know your view, and that, I think," said Mitchy, "is the most extraordinary part of it. I can tell you it would have put ME on."

"My view?" Mrs. Brook thought. "Have you forgotten that I had for you too a view that didn't?"

"Ah but we didn't differ, you and I. It wasn't a defiance and a prophecy. You wanted ME."

"I did indeed!" Mrs. Brook said simply.

"And you didn't want him. For HER, I mean. So you risked showing it."

She looked surprised. "DID I?"

Again they were face to face. "Your candour's divine!"

She wondered. "Do you mean it was even then?"

Mitchy smiled at her till he was red. "It's exquisite now."

"Well," she presently returned, "I knew my Van!"

"*I* thought I knew 'yours' too," Mitchy said. Their eyes met a minute and he added: "But I didn't." Then he exclaimed: "How you've worked it!"

She looked barely conscious. "'Worked it'?" After which, with a slightly sharper note: "How do you know — while you've been amusing yourself in places that I'd give my head to see again but never shall — what I've been doing?"

"Well, I saw, you know, that night at Tishy's, just before we left England, your wonderful start. I got a look at your attitude, as it were, and your system."

Her eyes were now far away, and she spoke after an instant without moving them. "And didn't I by the same token get a look at yours?"

"Mine?" Mitchy thought, but seemed to doubt. "My dear child, I hadn't any then."

"You mean that it has formed itself — your system — since?"

He shook his head with decision. "I assure you I'm quite at sea. I've never had, and I have as little as ever now, anything but my general philosophy, which I won't attempt at present to go into and of which moreover I think you've had first and last your glimpses. What I made out in you that night was a perfect policy."

Mrs. Brook had another of her infantine stares. "Every one that night seems to have made out something! All I can say is at any rate," she went on, "that in that case you were all far deeper than I was."

"It was just a blind instinct, without a programme or a scheme? Perhaps then, since it has so perfectly succeeded, the name doesn't matter. I'm lost, as I tell you," Mitchy declared, "in admiration of its success."

She looked, as before, so young, yet so grave. "What do you call its success?"

"Let me ask you rather — mayn't I? — what YOU call its failure."

Mrs. Brook, who had been standing for some minutes, seated herself at this as if to respond to his idea. But the next moment she had fallen back into thought. "Have you often heard from him?"

"Never once."

"And have you written?"

"Not a word either. I left it, you see," Mitchy smiled, "all, to YOU." After which he continued: "Has he

been with you much?"

She just hesitated. "As little as possible. But as it happens he was here just now."

Her visitor fairly flushed. "And I've only missed him?"

Her pause again was of the briefest. "You wouldn't if he HAD gone up."

"'Gone up'?"

"To Nanda, who has now her own sitting-room, as you know; for whom he immediately asked and for whose benefit, whatever you may think, I was at the end of a quarter of an hour, I assure you, perfectly ready to release him. He changed his mind, however, and went away without seeing her."

Mitchy showed the deepest interest. "And what made him change his mind?"

"Well, I'm thinking it out."

He appeared to watch this labour. "But with no light yet?"

"When it comes I'll tell you."

He hung fire once more but an instant. "You didn't yourself work the thing again?"

She rose at this in strange sincerity. "I think, you know, you go very far."

"Why, didn't we just now settle," he promptly replied, "that it's all instinctive and unconscious? If it was so that night at Tishy's — !"

"Ah, voyons, voyons," she broke in, "what did I do even then?" He laughed out at something in her tone. "You'd like it again all pictured — ?"

"I'm not afraid."

"Why, you just simply — publicly — took her back."

"And where was the monstrosity of that?"

"In the one little right place. In your removal of every doubt—"

"Well, of what?" He had appeared not quite to know how to put it. But he saw at last. "Why, of what we may still hope to do for her. Thanks to your care there were specimens." Then as she had the look of trying vainly to focus a few, "I can't recover them one by one," he pursued, "but the whole thing was quite lurid enough to do us all credit."

She met him after a little, but at such an odd point. "Pardon me if I scarcely see how much of the credit was yours. For the first time since I've known you, you went in for decency."

Mitchy's surprise showed as real. "It struck you as decency — ?"

Since he wished she thought it over. "Oh your behaviour — !"

"My behaviour was — my condition. Do you call THAT decent? No, you're quite out." He spoke, in his good nature, with an approach to reproof. "How can I ever — ?"

But it had already brought her quite round, and to a firmer earth that she clearly preferred to tread. "Are things really bad with you, Mitch?"

"Well, I'll tell you how they are. But not now."

"Some other time? — on your honour?"

"You shall have it all. Don't be afraid."

She dimly smiled. "It will be like old times."

He rather demurred. "For you perhaps. But not for me."

In spite of what he said it did hold her, and her hand again almost caressed him. "But — till you do tell me — is it very very dreadful?"

"That's just perhaps what I may have to get you to decide."

"Then shall I help you?" she eagerly asked.

"I think it will be quite in your line."

At the thought of her line — it sounded somehow so general — she released him a little with a sigh, yet still looking round, as it were, for possibilities. "Jane, you know, is in a state."

"Yes, Jane's in a state. That's a comfort!"

She continued in a manner to cling to him. "But is it your only one?"

He was very kind and patient. "Not perhaps quite."

"I'M a little of one?"

"My dear child, as you see."

Yes, she saw, but was still on the wing. "And shall you have recourse — ?"

"To what?" he asked as she appeared to falter.

"I don't mean to anything violent. But shall you tell Nanda?"

Mitchy wondered. "Tell her — ?"

"Well, everything. I think, you know," Mrs. Brook musingly observed, "that it would really serve her right."

Mitchy's silence, which lasted a minute, seemed to take the idea, but not perhaps quite to know what to do with it. "Ah I'm afraid I shall never really serve her right!"

Just as he spoke the butler reappeared; at sight of whom Mrs. Brook immediately guessed. "Mr. Longdon?"

"In Mr. Brookenham's room, ma'am. Mr. Brookenham has gone out."

"And where has he gone?"

"I think, ma'am, only for some evening papers."

She had an intense look for Mitchy; then she said to the man: "Ask him to wait three minutes — I'll ring;" turning again to her visitor as soon as they were alone. "You don't know how I'm trusting you!"

"Trusting me?"

"Why, if he comes up to you."

Mitchy thought. "Hadn't I better go down?"

"No — you may have Edward back. If you see him you must see him here. If I don't myself it's for a reason."

Mitchy again just sounded her. "His not, as you a while ago hinted — ?"

"Yes, caring for what I say." She had a pause, but she brought it out. "He doesn't believe a word — !"

"Of what you tell him?" Mitchy was splendid. "I see. And you want something said to him."

"Yes, that he'll take from YOU. Only it's for you," Mrs. Brook went on, "really and honestly, and as I trust you, to give it. But the comfort of you is that you'll do so if you promise."

Mitchy was infinitely struck. "But I haven't promised, eh? Of course I can't till I know what it is."

"It's to put before him — !"

"Oh I see: the situation."

"What has happened here to-day. Van's marked retreat and how, with the time that has passed, it makes us at last know where we are. You of course for yourself," Mrs. Brook wound up, "see that."

"Where we are?" Mitchy took a turn and came back. "But what then did Van come for? If you speak of a retreat there must have been an advance."

"Oh," said Mrs. Brook, "he simply wanted not to look too brutal. After so much absence he COULD come."

"Well, if he established that he isn't brutal, where was the retreat?"

"In his not going up to Nanda. He came — frankly — to do that, but made up his mind on second thoughts that he couldn't risk even being civil to her."

Mitchy had visibly warmed to his work. "Well, and what made the difference?"

She wondered. "What difference?"

"Why, of the effect, as you say, of his second thoughts. Thoughts of what?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Brook suddenly and as if it were quite simple— "I know THAT! Suspicions."

"And of whom?"

"Why, of YOU, you goose. Of your not having done—"

"Well, what?" he persisted as she paused.

"How shall I say it? The best thing for yourself. And of Nanda's feeling that. Don't you see?"

In the effort of seeing, or perhaps indeed in the full act of it, poor Mitchy glared as never before. "Do you mean Van's JEALOUS of me?"

Pressed as she was, there was something in his face that momentarily hushed her. "There it is!" she achieved however at last.

"Of ME?" Mitchy went on.

What was in his face so suddenly and strangely — was the look of rising tears — at sight of which, as from a compunction as prompt, she showed a lovely flush. "There it is, there it is," she repeated. "You ask me for a reason, and it's the only one I see. Of course if you don't care," she added, "he needn't come up. He can go straight to Nanda."

Mitchy had turned away again as with the impulse of hiding the tears that had risen and that had not

wholly disappeared even by the time he faced about. “Did Nanda know he was to come?”

“Mr. Longdon?”

“No, no. Was she expecting Van — ?”

“My dear man,” Mrs. Brook mildly wailed, “when can she have NOT been?”

Mitchy looked hard for an instant at the floor. “I mean does she know he has been and gone?”

Mrs. Brook, from where she stood and through the window, looked rather at the sky. “Her father will have told her.”

“Her father?” Mitchy frankly wondered. “Is HE in it?”

Mrs. Brook had at this a longer pause. “You assume, I suppose, Mitchy dear,” she then quavered “that I put him up — !”

“Put Edward up?” he broke in.

“No — that of course. Put Van up to ideas — !”

He caught it again. “About ME — what you call his suspicions?” He seemed to weigh the charge, but it ended, while he passed his hand hard over his eyes, in weariness and in the nearest approach to coldness he had ever shown Mrs. Brook. “It doesn’t matter. It’s every one’s fate to be in one way or another the subject of ideas. Do then,” he continued, “let Mr. Longdon come up.”

She instantly rang the bell. “Then I’ll go to Nanda. But don’t look frightened,” she added as she came back, “as to what we may — Edward or I — do next. It’s only to tell her that he’ll be with her.”

“Good. I’ll tell Tatton,” Mitchy replied.

Still, however, she lingered. “Shall you ever care for me more?”

He had almost the air, as he waited for her to go, of the master of the house, for she had made herself before him, as he stood with his back to the fire, as humble as a tolerated visitor. “Oh just as much. Where’s the difference? Aren’t our ties in fact rather multiplied?”

“That’s the way *I* want to feel it. And from the moment you recognise with me—”

“Yes?”

“Well, that he never, you know, really WOULD—”

He took her mercifully up. “There’s no harm done?” Mitchy thought of it.

It made her still hover. “Nanda will be rich. Toward that you CAN help, and it’s really, I may now tell you, what it came into my head you should see our friend here FOR.”

He maintained his waiting attitude. “Thanks, thanks.”

“You’re our guardian angel!” she exclaimed.

At this he laughed out. “Wait till you see what Mr. Longdon does!”

But she took no notice. “I want you to see before I go that I’ve done nothing for myself. Van, after all — !” she mused.

“Well?”

“Only hates me. It isn’t as with you,” she said. “I’ve really lost him.”

Mitchy for an instant, with the eyes that had shown his tears, glared away into space. “He can’t very positively, you know, now like ANY of us. He misses a fortune.”

“There it is!” Mrs. Brook once more observed. Then she had a comparative brightness. “I’m so glad YOU don’t!” He gave another laugh, but she was already facing Mr. Tatton, who had again answered the bell. “Show Mr. Longdon up.”

“I’m to tell him then it’s at your request?” Mitchy asked when the butler had gone.

“That you receive him? Oh yes. He’ll be the last to quarrel with that. But there’s one more thing.”

It was something over which of a sudden she had one of her returns of anxiety. “I’ve been trying for months and months to remember to find out from you—”

“Well, what?” he enquired, as she looked odd.

“Why if Harold ever gave back to you, as he swore to me on his honour he would, that five-pound note — !”

“But which, dear lady?” The sense of other incongruities than those they had been dealing with seemed to arrive now for Mitchy’s aid.

“The one that, ages ago, one day when you and Van were here, we had the joke about. You produced it, in sport, as a ‘fine’ for something, and put it on that table; after which, before I knew what you were about, before I could run after you, you had gone off and ridiculously left it. Of course the next minute — and again

before I could turn round — Harold had pounced on it, and I tried in vain to recover it from him. But all I could get him to do—"

"Was to promise to restore it straight to its owner?" Mitchy had listened so much less in surprise than in amusement that he had apparently after a moment re-established the scene. "Oh I recollect — he did settle with me. THAT'S all right."

She fixed him from the door of the next room. "You got every penny?"

"Every penny. But fancy your bringing it up!"

"Ah I always do, you know — SOME day."

"Yes, you're of a rigour — ! But be at peace. Harold's quite square," he went on, "and I quite meant to have asked you about him."

Mrs. Brook, promptly, was all for this. "Oh it's all right."

Mitchy came nearer. "Lady Fanny — ?"

"Yes — HAS stayed for him."

"Ah," said Mitchy, "I knew you'd do it! But hush — they're coming!" On which, while she whisked away, he went back to the fire.

IV

Ten minutes of talk with Mr. Longdon by Mrs. Brookenham's hearth elapsed for him without his arriving at the right moment to take up the business so richly put before him in his previous interview. No less time indeed could have sufficed to bring him into closer relation with this affair, and nothing at first could have been more marked than the earnestness of his care not to show impatience of appeals that were, for a person of his old friend's general style, simple recognitions and decencies. There was a limit to the mere allusiveness with which, in Mr. Longdon's school of manners, a foreign tour might be treated, and Mitchy, no doubt, plentifully showed that none of his frequent returns had encountered a curiosity at once so explicit and so discreet. To belong to a circle in which most of the members might be at any moment on the other side of the globe was inevitably to fall into the habit of few questions, as well as into that of making up for their fewness by their freedom. This interlocutor in short, while Mrs. Brook's representative privately thought over all he had in hand, went at some length and very charmingly — since it was but a tribute to common courtesy — into the Virgilian associations of the Bay of Naples. Finally, however, he started, his eye having turned to the clock. "I'm afraid that, though our hostess doesn't appear, I mustn't forget myself. I too came back but yesterday and I've an engagement — for which I'm already late — with Miss Brookenham, who has been so good as to ask me to tea."

The divided mind, the express civility, the decent "Miss Brookenham," the escape from their hostess — these were all things Mitchy could quickly take in, and they gave him in a moment his light for not missing his occasion. "I see, I see — I shall make you keep Nanda waiting. But there's something I shall ask you to take from me quite as a sufficient basis for that: which is simply that after all, you know — for I think you do know, don't you? — I'm nearly as much attached to her as you are."

Mr. Longdon had looked suddenly apprehensive and even a trifle embarrassed, but he spoke with due presence of mind. "Of course I understand that perfectly. If you hadn't liked her so much—"

"Well?" said Mitchy as he checked himself.

"I would never, last year, have gone to stay with you."

"Thank you!" Mitchy laughed.

"Though I like you also — and extremely," Mr. Longdon gravely pursued, "for yourself."

Mitchy made a sign of acknowledgement. "You like me better for HER than you do for anybody else BUT myself."

"You put it, I think, correctly. Of course I've not seen so much of Nanda — if between my age and hers, that is, any real contact is possible — without knowing that she now regards you as one of the very best of her friends, treating you, I find myself suspecting, with a degree of confidence—"

Mitchy gave a laugh of interruption. "That she doesn't show even to you?"

Mr. Longdon's poised glasses faced him. "Even! I don't mind, as the opportunity has come up, telling you frankly — and as from my time of life to your own — all the comfort I take in the sense that in any case of need or trouble she might look to you for whatever advice or support the crisis should demand."

"She has told you she feels I'd be there?" Mitchy after an instant asked.

"I'm not sure," his friend replied, "that I ought quite to mention anything she has 'told' me. I speak of what I've made out myself."

"Then I thank you more than I can say for your penetration. Her mother, I should let you know," Mitchy continued, "is with her just now."

Mr. Longdon took off his glasses with a jerk. "Has anything happened to her?"

"To account for the fact I refer to?" Mitchy said in amusement at his start. "She's not ill, that I know of, thank goodness, and she hasn't broken her leg. But something, none the less, has happened to her — that I think I may say. To tell you all in a word, it's the reason, such as it is, of my being here to meet you. Mrs. Brook asked me to wait. She'll see you herself some other time."

Mr. Longdon wondered. "And Nanda too?"

"Oh that must be between yourselves. Only, while I keep you here—"

"She understands my delay?"

Mitchy thought. "Mrs. Brook must have explained." Then as his companion took this in silence, "But you don't like it?" he asked.

"It only comes to me that Mrs. Brook's explanations — !"

"Are often so odd? Oh yes; but Nanda, you know, allows for that oddity. And Mrs. Brook, by the same token," Mitchy developed, "knows herself — no one better — what may frequently be thought of it. That's precisely the reason of her desire that you should have on this occasion explanations from a source that she's so good as to pronounce, for the immediate purpose, superior. As for Nanda," he wound up, "to be aware that we're here together won't strike her as so bad a sign."

"No," Mr. Longdon attentively assented; "she'll hardly fear we're plotting her ruin. But what then has happened to her?"

"Well," said Mitchy, "it's you, I think, who will have to give it a name. I know you know what I've known."

Mr. Longdon, his nippers again in place, hesitated. "Yes, I know."

"And you've accepted it."

"How could I help it? To reckon with such cleverness — !"

"Was beyond you? Ah it wasn't my cleverness," Mitchy said. "There's a greater than mine. There's a greater even than Van's. That's the whole point," he went on while his friend looked at him hard. "You don't even like it just a little?"

Mr. Longdon wondered. "The existence of such an element — ?"

"No; the existence simply of my knowledge of your idea."

"I suppose I'm bound to keep in mind in fairness the existence of my own knowledge of yours."

But Mitchy gave that the go-by. "Oh I've so many 'ideas'! I'm always getting hold of some new one and for the most part trying it — generally to let it go as a failure. Yes, I had one six months ago. I tried that. I'm trying it still."

"Then I hope," said Mr. Longdon with a gaiety slightly strained, "that, contrary to your usual rule, it's a success."

It was a gaiety, for that matter, that Mitchy's could match. "It does promise well! But I've another idea even now, and it's just what I'm again trying."

"On me?" Mr. Longdon still somewhat extravagantly smiled.

Mitchy thought. "Well, on two or three persons, of whom you ARE the first for me to tackle. But what I must begin with is having from you that you recognise she trusts us."

Mitchy's idea after an instant had visibly gone further. "Both of them — the two women up there at present so strangely together. Mrs. Brook must too; immensely. But for that you won't care."

Mr. Longdon had relapsed into an anxiety more natural than his expression of a moment before. "It's about time! But if Nanda didn't trust us," he went on, "her case would indeed be a sorry one. She has nobody else to trust."

"Yes." Mitchy's concurrence was grave. "Only you and me."

"Only you and me."

The eyes of the two men met over it in a pause terminated at last by Mitchy's saying: "We must make it all up to her."

"Is that your idea?"

"Ah," said Mitchy gently, "don't laugh at it."

His friend's grey gloom again covered him. "But what CAN — ?" Then as Mitchy showed a face that seemed to wince with a silent "What COULD?" the old man completed his objection. "Think of the magnitude of the loss."

"Oh I don't for a moment suggest," Mitchy hastened to reply, "that it isn't immense."

"She does care for him, you know," said Mr. Longdon.

Mitchy, at this, gave a wide, prolonged glare. "'Know' — ?" he ever so delicately murmured.

His irony had quite touched. "But of course you know! You know everything — Nanda and you."

There was a tone in it that moved a spring, and Mitchy laughed out. "I like your putting me with her! But we're all together. With Nanda," he next added, "it IS deep."

His companion took it from him. "Deep."

"And yet somehow it isn't abject."

The old man wondered. "'Abject'?"

"I mean it isn't pitiful. In its way," Mitchy developed, "it's happy."

This too, though rather ruefully, Mr. Longdon could take from him. “Yes — in its way.”

“Any passion so great, so complete,” Mitchy went on, “is — satisfied or unsatisfied — a life.” Mr. Longdon looked so interested that his fellow visitor, evidently stirred by what was now an appeal and a dependence, grew still more bland, or at least more assured, for affirmation. “She’s not TOO sorry for herself.”

“Ah she’s so proud!”

“Yes, but that’s a help.”

“Oh — not for US!”

It arrested Mitchy, but his ingenuity could only rebound. “In ONE way: that of reducing us to feel that the desire to ‘make up’ to her is — well, mainly for OUR relief. If she ‘trusts’ us, as I said just now, it isn’t for THAT she does so.” As his friend appeared to wait then to hear, it was presently with positive joy that he showed he could meet the last difficulty. “What she trusts us to do” — oh Mitchy had worked it out!— “is to let HIM off.”

“Let him off?” It still left Mr. Longdon dim.

“Easily. That’s all.”

“But what would letting him off hard be? It seems to me he’s — on any terms — already beyond us. He IS off.”

Mr. Longdon had given it a sound that suddenly made Mitchy appear to collapse under a sharper sense of the matter. “He IS off,” he moodily echoed.

His companion, again a little bewildered, watched him; then with impatience: “Do, please, tell me what has happened.”

He quickly pulled himself round. “Well, he was, after a long absence, here a while since as if expressly to see her. But after spending half an hour he went away without it.”

Mr. Longdon’s watch continued. “He spent the half-hour with her mother instead?”

“Oh ‘instead’ — it was hardly that. He at all events dropped his idea.”

“And what had it been, his idea?”

“You speak as if he had as many as I!” Mitchy replied. “In a manner indeed he has,” he continued as if for himself. “But they’re of a different kind,” he said to Mr. Longdon.

“What had it been, his idea?” the old man, however, simply repeated.

Mitchy’s confession at this seemed to explain his previous evasion. “We shall never know.”

Mr. Longdon hesitated. “He won’t tell YOU?”

“Me?” Mitchy had a pause. “Less than any one.”

Many things they had not spoken had already passed between them, and something evidently, to the sense of each, passed during the moment that followed this. “While you were abroad,” Mr. Longdon presently asked, “did you hear from him?”

“Never. And I wrote nothing.”

“Like me,” said Mr. Longdon. “I’ve neither written nor heard.”

“Ah but with you it will be different.” Mr. Longdon, as if with the outbreak of an agitation hitherto controlled, had turned abruptly away and, with the usual swing of his glass, begun almost wildly to wander. “You WILL hear.”

“I shall be curious.”

“Oh but what Nanda wants, you know, is that you shouldn’t be too much so.”

Mr. Longdon thoughtfully rambled. “Too much — ?”

“To let him off, as we were saying, easily.”

The elder man for a while said nothing more, but he at last came back. “She’d like me actually to give him something?”

“I dare say!”

“Money?”

Mitchy smiled. “A handsome present.” They were face to face again with more mute interchange. “She doesn’t want HIM to have lost — !” Mr. Longdon, however, on this, once more broke off while Mitchy’s eyes followed him. “Doesn’t it give a sort of measure of what she may feel — ?”

He had paused, working it out again with the effect of his friend’s returning afresh to be fed with his light. “Doesn’t what give it?”

"Why the fact that we still like him."

Mr. Longdon stared. "Do YOU still like him?"

"If I didn't how should I mind — ?" But on the utterance of it Mitchy fairly pulled up.

His companion, after another look, laid a mild hand on his shoulder. "What is it you mind?"

"From HIM? Oh nothing!" He could trust himself again. "There are people like that — great cases of privilege."

"He IS one!" Mr. Longdon mused.

"There it is. They go through life somehow guaranteed. They can't help pleasing."

"Ah," Mr. Longdon murmured, "if it hadn't been for that — !"

"They hold, they keep every one," Mitchy went on. "It's the sacred terror."

The companions for a little seemed to stand together in this element; after which the elder turned once more away and appeared to continue to walk in it. "Poor Nanda!" then, in a far-off sigh, came across from him to Mitchy. Mitchy on this turned vaguely round to the fire, into which he remained gazing till he heard again Mr. Longdon's voice. "I knew it of course after all. It was what I came up to town for. That night, before you went abroad, at Mrs. Grendon's—"

"Yes?" — Mitchy was with him again.

"Well, made me see the future. It was then already too late."

Mitchy assented with emphasis. "Too late. She was spoiled for him."

If Mr. Longdon had to take it he took it at least quietly, only saying after a time: "And her mother ISN'T?"

"Oh yes. Quite."

"And does Mrs. Brook know it?"

"Yes, but doesn't mind. She resembles you and me. She 'still likes' him."

"But what good will that do her?"

Mitchy sketched a shrug. "What good does it do US?"

Mr. Longdon thought. "We can at least respect ourselves."

"CAN we?" Mitchy smiled.

"And HE can respect us," his friend, as if not hearing him, went on.

Mitchy seemed almost to demur. "He must think we're 'rum.'"

"Well, Mrs. Brook's worse than rum. He can't respect HER."

"Oh that will be perhaps," Mitchy laughed, "what she'll get just most out of!" It was the first time of Mr. Longdon's showing that even after a minute he had not understood him; so that as quickly as possible he passed to another point. "If you do anything may I be in it?"

"But what can I do? If it's over it's over."

"For HIM, yes. But not for her or for you or for me."

"Oh I'm not for long!" the old man wearily said, turning the next moment to the door, at which one of the footmen had appeared.

"Mrs. Brookenham's compliments, please sir," this messenger articulated, "and Miss Brookenham is now alone."

"Thanks — I'll come up."

The servant withdrew, and the eyes of the two visitors again met for a minute, after which Mitchy looked about for his hat. "Good-bye. I'll go."

Mr. Longdon watched him while, having found his hat, he looked about for his stick. "You want to be in EVERYTHING?"

Mitchy, without answering, smoothed his hat down; then he replied: "You say you're not for long, but you won't abandon her."

"Oh I mean I shan't last for ever."

"Well, since you so expressed it yourself, that's what I mean too. I assure you *I* shan't desert her. And if I can help you — !"

"Help me?" Mr. Longdon interrupted, looking at him hard.

It made him a little awkward. "Help you to help her, you know — !"

"You're very wonderful," Mr. Longdon presently returned. "A year and a half ago you wanted to help me to help Mr. Vanderbank."

"Well," said Mitchy, "you can't quite say I haven't."

“But your ideas of help are of a splendour — !”

“Oh I’ve told you about my ideas.” Mitchy was almost apologetic. Mr. Longdon had a pause. “I suppose I’m not indiscreet then in recognising your marriage as one of them. And that, with a responsibility so great already assumed, you appear fairly eager for another — !”

“Makes me out a kind of monster of benevolence?” Mitchy looked at it with a flushed face. “The two responsibilities are very much one and the same. My marriage has brought me, as it were, only nearer to Nanda. My wife and she, don’t you see? are particular friends.”

Mr. Longdon, on his side, turned a trifle pale; he looked rather hard at the floor. “I see — I see.” Then he raised his eyes. “But — to an old fellow like me — it’s all so strange.”

“It IS strange.” Mitchy spoke very kindly. “But it’s all right.”

Mr. Longdon gave a headshake that was both sad and sharp. “It’s all wrong. But YOU’RE all right!” he added in a different tone as he walked hastily away.

BOOK TENTH. NANDA

I

Nanda Brookenham, for a fortnight after Mr. Longdon's return, had found much to think of; but the bustle of business became, visibly for us, particularly great with her on a certain Friday afternoon in June. She was in unusual possession of that chamber of comfort in which so much of her life had lately been passed, the redecorated and rededicated room upstairs in which she had enjoyed a due measure both of solitude and of society. Passing the objects about her in review she gave especial attention to her rather marked wealth of books; changed repeatedly, for five minutes, the position of various volumes, transferred to tables those that were on shelves and rearranged shelves with an eye to the effect of backs. She was flagrantly engaged throughout indeed in the study of effect, which moreover, had the law of an extreme freshness not inveterately prevailed there, might have been observed to be traceable in the very detail of her own appearance. "Company" in short was in the air and expectation in the picture. The flowers on the little tables bloomed with a consciousness sharply taken up by the glitter of nick-nacks and reproduced in turn in the light exuberance of cushions on sofas and the measured drop of blinds in windows. The numerous photographed friends in particular were highly prepared, with small intense faces, each, that happened in every case to be turned to the door. The pair of eyes most dilated perhaps was that of old Van, present under a polished glass and in a frame of gilt-edged morocco that spoke out, across the room, of Piccadilly and Christmas, and visibly widening his gaze at the opening of the door, at the announcement of a name by a footman and at the entrance of a gentleman remarkably like him save as the resemblance was on the gentleman's part flattered. Vanderbank had not been in the room ten seconds before he showed ever so markedly that he had arrived to be kind. Kindness therefore becomes for us, by a quick turn of the glass that reflects the whole scene, the high pitch of the concert — a kindness that almost immediately filled the place, to the exclusion of everything else, with a familiar friendly voice, a brightness of good looks and good intentions, a constant though perhaps sometimes misapplied laugh, a superabundance almost of interest, inattention and movement.

The first thing the young man said was that he was tremendously glad she had written. "I think it was most particularly nice of you." And this thought precisely seemed, as he spoke, a flower of the general bloom — as if the niceness he had brought in was so great that it straightway converted everything to its image. "The only thing that upset me a little," he went on, "was your saying that before writing it you had so hesitated and waited. I hope very much, you know, that you'll never do anything of that kind again. If you've ever the slightest desire to see me — for no matter what reason, if there's ever the smallest thing of any sort that I can do for you, I promise you I shan't easily forgive you if you stand on ceremony. It seems to me that when people have known each other as long as you and I there's one comfort at least they may treat themselves to. I mean of course," Van developed, "that of being easy and frank and natural. There are such a lot of relations in which one isn't, in which it doesn't pay, in which 'ease' in fact would be the greatest of troubles and 'nature' the greatest of falsities. However," he continued while he suddenly got up to change the place in which he had put his hat, "I don't really know why I'm preaching at such a rate, for I've a perfect consciousness of not myself requiring it. One does half the time preach more or less for one's self, eh? I'm not mistaken at all events, I think, about the right thing with YOU. And a hint's enough for you, I'm sure, on the right thing with me." He had been looking all round while he talked and had twice shifted his seat; so that it was quite in consonance with his general admiring notice that the next impression he broke out with should have achieved some air of relevance. "What extraordinarily lovely flowers you have and how charming you've made everything! You're always doing something — women are always changing the position of their furniture. If one happens to come in in the dark, no matter how well one knows the place, one sits down on a hat or a puppy-dog. But of course you'll say one doesn't come in in the dark, or at least, if one does, deserves what one gets. Only you know the way some women keep their rooms. I'm bound to say YOU don't, do you? — you don't go in for flower-pots in the windows and half a dozen blinds. Why SHOULD you? You HAVE got a lot to show!" He rose with this for the third time, as the better to command the scene. "What I mean is that sofa — which by the way is awfully good: you do, my dear Nanda, go it! It certainly was HERE the last time, wasn't it? and this thing was there. The last time — I mean the last time I was up here — was fearfully long ago: when, by the way, WAS it? But you see I HAVE been and that I remember it. And you've a lot more things now. You're laying up treasure. Really the increase of luxury — ! What an awfully jolly lot of books — have you read them all? Where did you learn so much about bindings?"

He continued to talk; he took things up and put them down; Nanda sat in her place, where her stillness,

fixed and colourless, contrasted with his rather flushed freedom, and appeared only to wait, half in surprise, half in surrender, for the flow of his suggestiveness to run its course, so that, having herself provoked the occasion, she might do a little more to meet it. It was by no means, however, that his presence in any degree ceased to prevail; for there were minutes during which her face, the only thing in her that moved, turning with his turns and following his glances, actually had a look inconsistent with anything but submission to almost any accident. It might have expressed a desire for his talk to last and last, an acceptance of any treatment of the hour or any version, or want of version, of her act that would best suit his ease, even in fact a resigned prevision of the occurrence of something that would leave her, quenched and blank, with the appearance of having made him come simply that she might look at him. She might indeed well have been aware of an inability to look at him little enough to make it flagrant that she had appealed to him for something quite different. Keeping the situation meanwhile thus in his hands he recognised over the chimney a new alteration. "There used to be a big print — wasn't there? a thing of the fifties — we had lots of them at home; some place or other 'in the olden time.' And now there's that lovely French glass. So you see." He spoke as if she had in some way gainsaid him, whereas he had not left her time even to answer a question. But he broke out anew on the beauty of her flowers. "You have awfully good ones — where do you get them? Flowers and pictures and — what are the other things people have when they're happy and superior? — books and birds. You ought to have a bird or two, though I dare say you think that by the noise I make I'm as good myself as a dozen. Isn't there some girl in some story — it isn't Scott; what is it? — who had domestic difficulties and a cage in her window and whom one associates with chickweed and virtue? It isn't Esmeralda — Esmeralda had a poodle, hadn't she? — or have I got my heroines mixed? You're up here yourself like a heroine; you're perched in your tower or what do you call it? — your bower. You quite hang over the place, you know — the great wicked city, the wonderful London sky and the monuments looming through: or am I again only muddling up my Zola? You must have the sunsets — haven't you? No — what am I talking about? Of course you look north. Well, they strike me as about the only thing you haven't. At the same time it's not only because I envy you that I feel humiliated. I ought to have sent you some flowers." He smote himself with horror, throwing back his head with a sudden thought. "Why in goodness when I got your note didn't I for once in my life do something really graceful? I simply liked it and answered it. Here I am. But I've brought nothing. I haven't even brought a box of sweets. I'm not a man of the world."

"Most of the flowers here," Nanda at last said, "come from Mr. Longdon. Don't you remember his garden?"

Vanderbank, in quick response, called it up. "Dear yes — wasn't it charming? And that morning you and I spent there" — he was so careful to be easy about it— "talking under the trees."

"You had gone out to be quiet and read — !"

"And you came out to look after me. Well, I remember," Van went on, "that we had some good talk."

The talk, Nanda's face implied, had become dim to her; but there were other things. "You know he's a great gardener — I mean really one of the greatest. His garden's like a dinner in a house where the person — the person of the house — thoroughly knows and cares."

"I see. And he sends you dishes from the table."

"Often — every week. It comes to the same thing — now that he's in town his gardener does it."

"Charming of them both!" Vanderbank exclaimed. "But his gardener — that extraordinarily tall fellow with the long red beard — was almost as nice as himself. I had talks with HIM too and remember every word he said. I remember he told me you asked questions that showed 'a deal of study.' But I thought I had never seen all round such a charming lot of people — I mean as those down there that our friend has got about him. It's an awfully good note for a man, pleasant servants, I always think, don't you? Mr. Longdon's — and quite without their saying anything; just from the sort of type and manner they had — struck me as a kind of chorus of praise. The same with Mitchy's at Mertle, I remember," Van rambled on. "Mitchy's the sort of chap who might have awful ones, but I recollect telling him that one quite felt as if it were with THEM one had come to stay. Good note, good note," he cheerfully repeated. "I'm bound to say, you know," he continued in this key, "that you've a jolly sense for getting in with people who make you comfortable. Then, by the way, he's still in town?"

Nanda waited. "Do you mean Mr. Mitchy?"

"Oh HE is, I know — I met them two nights ago; and by the way again — don't let me forget — I want to speak to you about his wife. But I've not seen, do you know? Mr. Longdon — which is really too awful.

Twice, thrice I think, have I at moments like this one snatched myself from pressure; but there's no finding the old demon at any earthly hour. When do YOU go — or does he only come here? Of course I see you've got the place arranged for him. When I asked at his hotel at what hour he ever IS in, blest if the fellow didn't say 'very often, sir, about ten!' And when I said 'Ten P. M.?' he quite laughed at my innocence over a person of such habits. What ARE his habits then now, and what are you putting him up to? Seriously," Vanderbank pursued, "I AM awfully sorry and I wonder if, the first time you've a chance, you'd kindly tell him you've heard me say so and that I mean yet to run him to earth. The same really with the dear Mitchys. I didn't somehow, the other night, in such a lot of people, get at them. But I sat opposite to Aggie all through dinner, and that puts me in mind. I should like volumes from you about Aggie, please. It's too revolting of me not to go to see her. But every one knows I'm busy. We're up to our necks!"

"I can't tell you," said Nanda, "how kind I think it of you to have found, with all you have to do, a moment for THIS. But please, without delay, let me tell you — !"

Practically, however, he would let her tell him nothing; his almost aggressive friendly optimism clung so to references of short range. "Don't mention it, please. It's too charming of you to squeeze me in. To see YOU moreover does me good. Quite distinct good. And your writing me touched me — oh but really. There were all sorts of old things in it." Then he broke out once more on her books, one of which for some minutes past he had held in his hand. "I see you go in for sets — and, my dear child, upon my word, I see, BIG sets. What's this?— 'Vol. 23: The British Poets.' Vol. 23 is delightful — do tell me about Vol. 23. Are you doing much in the British Poets? But when the deuce, you wonderful being, do you find time to read? *I* don't find any — it's too hideous. One relapses in London into such illiteracy and barbarism. I have to keep up a false glitter to hide in conversation my rapidly increasing ignorance: I should be so ashamed after all to see other people NOT shocked by it. But teach me, teach me!" he gaily went on.

"The British Poets," Nanda immediately answered, "were given me by Mr. Longdon, who has given me all the good books I have except a few — those in that top row — that have been given me at different times by Mr. Mitchy. Mr. Mitchy has sent me flowers too, as well as Mr. Longdon. And they're both — since we've spoken of my seeing them — coming by appointment this afternoon; not together, but Mr. Mitchy at 5.30 and Mr. Longdon at 6.30."

She had spoken as with conscious promptitude, making up for what she had not yet succeeded in saying by a quick, complete statement of her case. She was evidently also going on with more, but her actual visitor had already taken her up with a laugh. "You ARE making a day of it and you run us like railway-trains!" He looked at his watch. "Have *I* then time?"

"It seems to me I should say 'Have *I*?' But it's not half-past four," Nanda went on, "and though I've something very particular of course to say to you it won't take long. They don't bring tea till five, and you must surely stay till that. I had already written to you when they each, for the same reason, proposed this afternoon. They go out of town to-morrow for Sunday."

"Oh I see — and they have to see you first. What an influence you exert, you know, on people's behaviour!"

She continued as literal as her friend was facetious. "Well, it just happened so, and it didn't matter, since, on my asking you, don't you know? to choose your time, you had taken, as suiting you best, this comparatively early hour."

"Oh perfectly." But he again had his watch out. "I've a job, perversely — that was my reason — on the other side of the world; which, by the way, I'm afraid, won't permit me to wait for tea. My tea doesn't matter." The watch went back to his pocket. "I'm sorry to say I must be off before five. It has been delightful at all events to see you again."

He was on his feet as he spoke, and though he had been half the time on his feet his last words gave the effect of his moving almost immediately to the door. It appeared to come out with them rather clearer than before that he was embarrassed enough really to need help, and it was doubtless the measure she after an instant took of this that enabled Nanda, with a quietness all her own, to draw to herself a little more of the situation. The quietness was plainly determined for her by a quick vision of its being the best assistance she could show. Had he an inward terror that explained his superficial nervousness, the incoherence of a loquacity designed, it would seem, to check in each direction her advance? He only fed it in that case by allowing his precautionary benevolence to put him in so much deeper. Where indeed could he have supposed she wanted to come out, and what that she could ever do for him would really be so beautiful as this present chance to

smooth his confusion and add as much as possible to that refined satisfaction with himself which would proceed from his having dealt with a difficult hour in a gallant and delicate way? To force upon him an awkwardness was like forcing a disfigurement or a hurt, so that at the end of a minute, during which the expression of her face became a kind of uplifted view of her opportunity, she arrived at the appearance of having changed places with him and of their being together precisely in order that he — not she — should be let down easily.

II

"But surely you're not going already?" she asked. "Why in the world then do you suppose I appealed to you?"

"Bless me, no; I've lots of time." He dropped, laughing for very eagerness, straight into another chair. "You're too awfully interesting. Is it really an 'appeal'?" Putting the question indeed he could scarce even yet allow her a chance to answer it. "It's only that you make me a little nervous with your account of all the people who are going to tumble in. And there's one thing more," he quickly went on; "I just want to make the point in case we should be interrupted. The whole fun is in seeing you this way alone."

"Is THAT the point?" Nanda, as he took breath, gravely asked.

"That's a part of it — I feel it, I assure you, to be charming. But what I meant — if you'd only give me time, you know, to put in a word — is what for that matter I've already told you: that it almost spoils my pleasure for you to keep reminding me that a bit of luck like this — luck for ME: I see you coming! — is after all for you but a question of business. Hang business! Good — don't stab me with that paper-knife. I listen. What IS the great affair?" Then as it looked for an instant as if the words she had prepared were just, in the supreme pinch of her need, falling apart, he once more tried his advantage. "Oh if there's any difficulty about it let it go — we'll take it for granted. There's one thing at any rate — do let me say this — that I SHOULD like you to keep before me: I want before I go to make you light up for me the question of little Aggie. Oh there are other questions too as to which I regard you as a perfect fountain of curious knowledge! However, we'll take them one by one — the next some other time. You always seem to me to hold the strings of such a lot of queer little dramas. Have something on the shelf for me when we meet again. THE thing just now is the outlook for Mitchy's affair. One cares enough for old Mitch to fancy one may feel safer for a lead or two. In fact I want regularly to turn you on."

"Ah but the thing I happen to have taken it into my head to say to you," Nanda now securely enough replied, "hasn't the least bit to do, I assure you, either with Aggie or with 'old Mitch.' If you don't want to hear it — want some way of getting off — please believe THEY won't help you a bit." It was quite in fact that she felt herself at last to have found the right tone. Nothing less than a conviction of this could have made her after an instant add: "What in the world, Mr. Van, are you afraid of?"

Well, that it WAS the right tone a single little minute was sufficient to prove — a minute, I must yet haste to say, big enough in spite of its smallness to contain the longest look on any occasion exchanged between these friends. It was one of those looks — not so frequent, it must be admitted, as the muse of history, dealing at best in short cuts, is often by the conditions of her trade reduced to representing them — which after they have come and gone are felt not only to have changed relations but absolutely to have cleared the air. It certainly helped Vanderbank to find his answer. "I'm only afraid, I think, of your conscience."

He had been indeed for the space more helped than she. "My conscience?"

"Think it over — quite at your leisure — and some day you'll understand. There's no hurry," he continued — "no hurry. And when you do understand, it needn't make your existence a burden to you to fancy you must tell me." Oh he was so kind — kinder than ever now. "The thing is, you see, that *I* haven't a conscience. I only want my fun."

They had on this a second look, also decidedly comfortable, though discounted, as the phrase is, by the other, which had really in its way exhausted the possibilities of looks. "Oh I want MY fun too," said Nanda, "and little as it may strike you in some ways as looking like it, just this, I beg you to believe, is the real thing. What's at the bottom of it," she went on, "is a talk I had not long ago with mother."

"Oh yes," Van returned with brightly blushing interest. "The fun," he laughed, "that's to be got out of 'mother'!"

"Oh I'm not thinking so much of that. I'm thinking of any that she herself may be still in a position to pick up. Mine now, don't you see? is in making out how I can manage for this. Of course it's rather difficult," the girl pursued, "for me to tell you exactly what I mean."

"Oh but it isn't a bit difficult for me to understand you!" Vanderbank spoke, in his geniality, as if this were in fact the veriest trifle. "You've got your mother on your mind. That's very much what I mean by your conscience."

Nanda had a fresh hesitation, but evidently unaccompanied at present by any pain. "Don't you still LIKE

mamma?" she at any rate quite successfully brought out. "I must tell you," she quickly subjoined, "that though I've mentioned my talk with her as having finally led to my writing to you, it isn't in the least that she then suggested my putting you the question. I put it," she explained, "quite off my own bat."

The explanation, as an effect immediately produced, did proportionately much for the visitor, who sat back in his chair with a pleased — a distinctly exhilarated — sense both of what he himself and what Nanda had done. "You're an adorable family!"

"Well then if mother's adorable why give her up? This I don't mind admitting she did, the day I speak of, let me see that she feels you've done; but without suggesting either — not a scrap, please believe — that I should make you any sort of scene about it. Of course in the first place she knows perfectly that anything like a scene would be no use. You couldn't make out even if you wanted," Nanda went on, "that THIS is one. She won't hear us — will she? — smashing the furniture. I didn't think for a while that I could do anything at all, and I worried myself with that idea half to death. Then suddenly it came to me that I could do just what I'm doing now. You said a while ago that we must never be — you and I — anything but frank and natural. That's what I said to myself also — why not? Here I am for you therefore as natural as a cold in your head. I just ask you — I even press you. It's because, as she said, you've practically ceased coming. Of course I know everything changes. It's the law — what is it?— 'the great law' of something or other. All sorts of things happen — things come to an end. She has more or less — by his marriage — lost Mitchy. I don't want her to lose everything. Do stick to her. What I really wanted to say to you — to bring it straight out — is that I don't believe you thoroughly know how awfully she likes you. I hope my saying such a thing doesn't affect you as 'immodest.' One never knows — but I don't much care if it does. I suppose it WOULD be immodest if I were to say that I verily believe she's in love with you. Not, for that matter, that father would mind — he wouldn't mind, as he says, a tuppenny rap. So" — she extraordinarily kept it up— "you're welcome to any good the information may have for you: though that, I dare say, does sound hideous. No matter — if I produce any effect on you. That's the only thing I want. When I think of her downstairs there so often nowadays practically alone I feel as if I could scarcely bear it. She's so fearfully young."

This time at least her speech, while she went from point to point, completely hushed him, though after a full glimpse of the direction it was taking he ceased to meet her eyes and only sat staring hard at the pattern of the rug. Even when at last he spoke it was without looking up. "You're indeed, as she herself used to say, the modern daughter! It takes that type to wish to make a career for her parents."

"Oh," said Nanda very simply, "it isn't a 'career' exactly, is it — keeping hold of an old friend? but it may console a little, mayn't it, for the absence of one? At all events I didn't want not to have spoken before it's too late. Of course I don't know what's the matter between you, or if anything's really the matter at all. I don't care at any rate WHAT is — it can't be anything very bad. Make it up, make it up — forget it. I don't pretend that's a career for YOU any more than for her; but there it is. I know how I sound — most patronising and pushing; but nothing venture nothing have. You CAN'T know how much you are to her. You're more to her, I verily believe, than any one EVER was. I hate to have the appearance of plotting anything about her behind her back; so I'll just say it once for all. She said once, in speaking of it to a person who repeated it to me, that you had done more for her than any one, because it was you who had really brought her out. It WAS. You did. I saw it at the time myself. I was very small, but I COULD see it. You'll say I must have been a most uncanny little wretch, and I dare say I was and am keeping now the pleasant promise. That doesn't prevent one's feeling that when a person has brought a person out—"

"A person should take the consequences," Vanderbank broke in, "and see a person through?" He could meet her now perfectly and proceeded admirably to do it. "There's an immense deal in that, I admit — I admit. I'm bound to say I don't know quite what I did — one does those things, no doubt, with a fine unconsciousness: I should have thought indeed it was the other way round. But I assure you I accept all consequences and all responsibilities. If you don't know what's the matter between us I'm sure *I* don't either. It can't be much — we'll look into it. I don't mean you and I — YOU mustn't be any more worried; but she and her so unwittingly faithless one. I HAVEN'T been as often, I know" — Van pleasantly kept his course. "But there's a tide in the affairs of men — and of women too, and of girls and of every one. You know what I mean — you know it for yourself. The great thing is that — bless both your hearts! — one doesn't, one simply CAN'T if one would, give your mother up. It's absurd to talk about it. Nobody ever did such a thing in his life. There she is, like the moon or the Marble Arch. I don't say, mind you," he candidly explained, "that every one LIKES her equally: that's another affair. But no one who ever HAS liked her can afford ever again

for any long period to do without her. There are too many stupid people — there's too much dull company. That, in London, is to be had by the ton; your mother's intelligence, on the other hand, will always have its price. One can talk with her for a change. She's fine, fine, fine. So, my dear child, be quiet. She's a fixed star."

"Oh I know she is," Nanda said. "It's YOU—"

"Who may be only the flashing meteor?" He sat and smiled at her. "I promise you then that your words have stayed me in my course. You've made me stand as still as Joshua made the sun." With which he got straight up. "'Young,' you say she is?" — for as if to make up for it he all the more sociably continued. "It's not like anything else. She's youth. She's MY youth — she WAS mine. And if you ever have a chance," he wound up, "do put in for me that if she wants REALLY to know she's booked for my old age. She's clever enough, you know" — and Vanderbank, laughing, went over for his hat— "to understand what you tell her."

Nanda took this in with due attention; she was also now on her feet. "And then she's so lovely."

"Awfully pretty!"

"I don't say it, as they say, you know," the girl continued, "BECAUSE she's mother, but I often think when we're out that wherever she is — !"

"There's no one that all round really touches her?" Vanderbank took it up with zeal. "Oh so every one thinks, and in fact one's appreciation of the charming things in that way so intensely her own can scarcely breathe on them all lightly enough. And then, hang it, she has perceptions — which are not things that run about the streets. She has surprises." He almost broke down for vividness. "She has little ways."

"Well, I'm glad you do like her," Nanda gravely replied.

At this again he fairly faced her, his momentary silence making it still more direct. "I like, you know, about as well as I ever liked anything, this wonderful idea of yours of putting in a plea for her solitude and her youth. Don't think I do it injustice if I say — which is saying much — that it's quite as charming as it's amusing. And now good-bye."

He had put out his hand, but Nanda hesitated. "You won't wait for tea?"

"My dear child, I can't." He seemed to feel, however, that something more must be said. "We shall meet again. But it's getting on, isn't it, toward the general scatter?"

"Yes, and I hope that this year," she answered, "you'll have a good holiday."

"Oh we shall meet before that. I shall do what I can, but upon my word I feel, you know," he laughed, "that such a tuning-up as YOU'VE given me will last me a long time. It's like the high Alps." Then with his hand out again he added: "Have you any plans yourself?"

So many, it might have seemed, that she had no time to take for thinking of them. "I dare say I shall be away a good deal."

He candidly wondered. "With Mr. Longdon?"

"Yes — with him most."

He had another pause. "Really for a long time?"

"A long long one, I hope."

"Your mother's willing again?"

"Oh perfectly. And you see that's why."

"Why?" She had said nothing more, and he failed to understand.

"Why you mustn't too much leave her alone. DON'T!" Nanda brought out.

"I won't. But," he presently added, "there are one or two things."

"Well, what are they?"

He produced in some seriousness the first. "Won't she after all see the Mitchys?"

"Not so much either. That of course is now very different."

Vanderbank demurred. "But not for YOU, I gather — is it? Don't you expect to see them?"

"Oh yes — I hope they'll come down."

He moved away a little — not straight to the door. "To Beccles? Funny place for them, a little though, isn't it?"

He had put the question as if for amusement, but Nanda took it literally. "Ah not when they're invited so very very charmingly. Not when he wants them so."

"Mr. Longdon? Then that keeps up?"

"'That'?" — she was at a loss.

"I mean his intimacy — with Mitchy."

“So far as it IS an intimacy.”

“But didn’t you, by the way” — and he looked again at his watch— “tell me they’re just about to turn up together?”

“Oh not so very particularly together.”

“Mitchy first alone?” Vanderbank asked.

She had a smile that was dim, that was slightly strange. “Unless you’ll stay for company.”

“Thanks — impossible. And then Mr. Longdon alone?”

“Unless Mitchy stays.”

He had another pause. “You haven’t after all told me about the ‘evolution’ — or the evolutions — of his wife.”

“How can I if you don’t give me time?”

“I see — of course not.” He seemed to feel for an instant the return of his curiosity. “Yet it won’t do, will it? to have her out before HIM? No, I must go.” He came back to her and at present she gave him a hand. “But if you do see Mr. Longdon alone will you do me a service? I mean indeed not simply today, but with all other good chances?”

She waited. “Any service whatever. But which first?”

“Well,” he returned in a moment, “let us call it a bargain. I look after your mother—”

“And I — ?” She had had to wait again.

“Look after my good name. I mean for common decency to HIM. He has been of a kindness to me that, when I think of my failure to return it, makes me blush from head to foot. I’ve odiously neglected him — by a complication of accidents. There are things I ought to have done that I haven’t. There’s one in particular — but it doesn’t matter. And I haven’t even explained about THAT. I’ve been a brute and I didn’t mean it and I couldn’t help it. But there it is. Say a good word for me. Make out somehow or other that I’m NOT a beast. In short,” the young man said, quite flushed once more with the intensity of his thought, “let us have it that you may quite trust ME if you’ll let me a little — just for my character as a gentleman — trust YOU.”

“Ah you may trust me,” Nanda replied with her handshake.

“Good-bye then!” he called from the door.

“Good-bye,” she said after he had closed it.

III

It was half-past five when Mitchy turned up; and her relapse had in the mean time known no arrest but the arrival of tea, which, however, she had left unnoticed. He expressed on entering the fear that he failed of exactitude, to which she replied by the assurance that he was on the contrary remarkably near it and by the mention of all the aid to patience she had drawn from the pleasure of half an hour with Mr. Van — an allusion that of course immediately provoked on Mitchy's part the liveliest interest.

"He HAS risked it at last then? How tremendously exciting! And your mother?" he went on; after which, as she said nothing: "Did SHE see him, I mean, and is he perhaps with her now?"

"No; she won't have come in — unless you asked."

"I didn't ask. I asked only for you."

Nanda thought an instant. "But you'll still sometimes come to see her, won't you? I mean you won't ever give her up?"

Mitchy at this laughed out. "My dear child, you're an adorable family!"

She took it placidly enough. "That's what Mr. Van said. He said I'm trying to make a career for her."

"Did he?" Her visitor, though without prejudice to his amusement, appeared struck. "You must have got in with him rather deep."

She again considered. "Well, I think I did rather. He was awfully beautiful and kind."

"Oh," Mitchy concurred, "trust him always for that!"

"He wrote me, on my note," Nanda pursued, "a tremendously good answer."

Mitchy was struck afresh. "Your note? What note?"

"To ask him to come. I wrote at the beginning of the week."

"Oh — I see" Mitchy observed as if this were rather different. "He couldn't then of course have done less than come."

Yet his companion again thought. "I don't know."

"Oh come — I say: You do know," Mitchy laughed. "I should like to see him — or you either!" There would have been for a continuous spectator of these episodes an odd resemblance between the manner and all the movements that had followed his entrance and those that had accompanied the installation of his predecessor. He laid his hat, as Vanderbank had done, in three places in succession and appeared to question scarcely less the safety, somewhere, of his umbrella and the grace of retaining in his hand his gloves. He postponed the final selection of a seat and he looked at the objects about him while he spoke of other matters. Quite in the same fashion indeed at last these objects impressed him. "How charming you've made your room and what a lot of nice things you've got!"

"That's just what Mr. Van said too. He seemed immensely struck."

But Mitchy hereupon once more had a drop to extravagance. "Can I do nothing then but repeat him? I came, you know, to be original."

"It would be original for you," Nanda promptly returned, "to be at all like him. But you won't," she went back, "not sometimes come for mother only? You'll have plenty of chances."

This he took up with more gravity. "What do you mean by chances? That you're going away? That WILL add to the attraction!" he exclaimed as she kept silence.

"I shall have to wait," she answered at last, "to tell you definitely what I'm to do. It's all in the air — yet I think I shall know to-day. I'm to see Mr. Longdon."

Mitchy wondered. "To-day?"

"He's coming at half-past six."

"And then you'll know?"

"Well — HE will."

"Mr. Longdon?"

"I meant Mr. Longdon," she said after a moment.

Mitchy had his watch out. "Then shall I interfere?"

"There are quantities of time. You must have your tea. You see at any rate," the girl continued, "what I mean by your chances."

She had made him his tea, which he had taken. "You do squeeze us in!"

"Well, it's an accident your coming together — except of course that you're NOT together. I simply took the time that you each independently proposed. But it would have been all right even if you HAD met.

"That is, I mean," she explained, "even if you and Mr. Longdon do. Mr. Van, I confess, I did want alone."

Mitchy had been glaring at her over his tea. "You're more and more remarkable!"

"Well then if I improve so give me your promise."

Mitchy, as he partook of refreshment, kept up his thoughtful gaze. "I shall presently want some more, please. But do you mind my asking if Van knew—"

"That Mr. Longdon's to come? Oh yes, I told him, and he left with me a message for him."

"A message? How awfully interesting!"

Nanda thought. "It WILL be awfully — to Mr. Longdon."

"Some more NOW, please," said Mitchy while she took his cup. "And to Mr. Longdon only, eh? Is that a way of saying that it's none of MY business?"

The fact of her attending — and with a happy show of particular care — to his immediate material want added somehow, as she replied, to her effect of sincerity. "Ah, Mr. Mitchy, the business of mine that has not by this time ever so naturally become a business of yours — well, I can't think of any just now, and I wouldn't, you know, if I could!"

"I can promise you then that there's none of mine," Mitchy declared, "that hasn't made by the same token quite the same shift. Keep it well before you, please, that if ever a young woman had a grave lookout — !"

"What do you mean," she interrupted, "by a grave lookout?"

"Well, the certainty of finding herself saddled for all time to come with the affairs of a gentleman whom she can never get rid of on the specious plea that he's only her husband or her lover or her father or her son or her brother or her uncle or her cousin. There, as none of these characters, he just stands."

"Yes," Nanda kindly mused, "he's simply her Mitchy."

"Precisely. And a Mitchy, you see, is — what do you call it? — simply indissoluble. He's moreover inordinately inquisitive. He goes to the length of wondering whether Van also learned that you were expecting ME."

"Oh yes — I told him everything."

Mitchy smiled. "Everything?"

"I told him — I told him," she replied with impatience.

Mitchy hesitated. "And did he then leave me also a message?"

"No, nothing. What I'm to do for him with Mr. Longdon," she immediately explained, "is to make practically a kind of apology."

"Ah and for me" — Mitchy quickly took it up— "there can be no question of anything of that kind. I see. He has done me no wrong."

Nanda, with her eyes now on the window, turned it over. "I don't much think he would know even if he had."

"I see, I see. And we wouldn't tell him."

She turned with some abruptness from the outer view. "We wouldn't tell him. But he was beautiful all round," she went on. "No one could have been nicer about having for so long, for instance, come so little to the house. As if he hadn't only too many other things to do! He didn't even make them out nearly the good reasons he might. But fancy, with his important duties — all the great affairs on his hands — our making vulgar little rows about being 'neglected'! He actually made so little of what he might easily plead — speaking so, I mean, as if he were all in the wrong — that one had almost positively to SHOW him his excuses. As if" — she really kept it up— "he hasn't plenty!"

"It's only people like me," Mitchy threw out, "who have none?"

"Yes — people like you. People of no use, of no occupation and no importance. Like you, you know," she pursued, "there are so many." Then it was with no transition of tone that she added: "If you're bad, Mitchy, I won't tell you anything."

"And if I'm good what will you tell me? What I want really most to KNOW is why he should be, as you said just now, 'apologetic' to Mr. Longdon. What's the wrong he allows he has done HIM?"

"Oh he has 'neglected' him — if that's any comfort to us — quite as much."

"Hasn't looked him up and that sort of thing?"

"Yes — and he mentioned some other matter."

Mitchy wondered. "'Mentioned' it?"

"In which," said Nanda, "he hasn't pleased him."

Mitchy after an instant risked it. "But what other matter?"

"Oh he says that when I speak to him Mr. Longdon will know."

Mitchy gravely took this in. "And shall you speak to him?"

"For Mr. Van?" How, she seemed to ask, could he doubt it? "Why the very first thing."

"And then will Mr. Longdon tell you?"

"What Mr. Van means?" Nanda thought. "Well — I hope not."

Mitchy followed it up. "You 'hope' — ?"

"Why if it's anything that could possibly make any one like him any less. I mean I shan't in that case in the least want to hear it."

Mitchy looked as if he could understand that and yet could also imagine something of a conflict. "But if Mr. Longdon insists — ?"

"On making me know? I shan't let him insist. Would YOU?" she put to him.

"Oh I'm not in question!"

"Yes, you are!" she quite rang out.

"Ah — !" Mitchy laughed. After which he added: "Well then, I might overbear you."

"No, you mightn't," she as positively declared again, "and you wouldn't at any rate desire to."

This he finally showed he could take from her — showed it in the silence in which for a minute their eyes met; then showed it perhaps even more in his deep exclamation: "You're complete!"

For such a proposition as well she had the same detached sense. "I don't think I am in anything but the wish to keep YOU so."

"Well — keep me, keep me! It strikes me that I'm not at all now on a footing, you know, of keeping myself. I quite give you notice in fact," Mitchy went on, "that I'm going to come to you henceforth for everything. But you're too wonderful," he wound up as she at first said nothing to this. "I don't even frighten you."

"Yes — fortunately for you."

"Ah but I distinctly warn you that I mean to do my very best for it!"

Nanda viewed it all with as near an approach to gaiety as she often achieved. "Well, if you should ever succeed it would be a dark day for you."

"You bristle with your own guns," he pursued, "but the ingenuity of a lifetime shall be devoted to my taking you on some quarter on which you're not prepared."

"And what quarter, pray, will that be?"

"Ah I'm not such a fool as to begin by giving you a tip!" Mitchy on this turned off with an ambiguous but unmistakeably natural sigh; he looked at photographs, he took up a book or two as Vanderbank had done, and for a couple of minutes there was silence between them. "What does stretch before me," he resumed after an interval during which clearly, in spite of his movements, he had looked at nothing— "what does stretch before me is the happy prospect of my feeling that I've found in you a friend with whom, so utterly and unreservedly, I can always go to the bottom of things. This luxury, you see now, of our freedom to look facts in the face is one of which, I promise you, I mean fully to avail myself." He stopped before her again, and again she was silent. "It's so awfully jolly, isn't it? that there's not at last a single thing that we can't take our ease about. I mean that we can't intelligibly name and comfortably tackle. We've worked through the long tunnel of artificial reserves and superstitious mysteries, and I at least shall have only to feel that in showing every confidence and dotting every 'i' I follow the example you so admirably set. You go down to the roots? Good. It's all I ask!"

He had dropped into a chair as he talked, and so long as she remained in her own they were confronted; but she presently got up and, the next moment, while he kept his place, was busy restoring order to the objects both her visitors had disarranged. "If you weren't delightful you'd be dreadful!"

"There we are! I could easily, in other words, frighten you if I would."

She took no notice of the remark, only, after a few more scattered touches, producing an observation of her own. "He's going, all the same, Mr. Van, to be charming to mother. We've settled that."

"Ah then he CAN make time — ?"

She judged it. "For as much as THAT, yes. For as much, I mean, as may sufficiently show her that he

hasn't given her up. So don't you recognise how much more time YOU can make?"

"Ah — see precisely — there we are again!" Mitchy promptly ejaculated.

Yet he had gone, it seemed, further than she followed. "But where?"

"Why, as I say, at the roots and in the depths of things."

"Oh!" She dropped to an indifference that was but part of her general patience for all his irony.

"It's needless to go into the question of not giving your mother up. One simply DOESN'T give her up. One can't. There she is."

"That's exactly what HE says. There she is."

"Ah but I don't want to say nothing but what 'he' says!" Mitchy laughed. "He can't at all events have mentioned to you any such link as the one that in my case is now almost the most palpable. I'VE got a wife, you know."

"Oh Mitchy!" the girl protestingly though vaguely murmured.

"And my wife — did you know it?" Mitchy went on, "is positively getting thick with your mother. Of course it isn't new to you that she's wonderful for wives. Now that our marriage is an accomplished fact she takes the greatest interest in it — or bids fair to if her attention can only be thoroughly secured — and more particularly in what I believe is generally called our peculiar situation: for it appears, you know, that we're to the most conspicuous degree possible IN a peculiar situation. Aggie's therefore already, and is likely to be still more, in what's universally recognised as your mother's regular line. Your mother will attract her, study her, finally 'understand' her. In fact she'll 'help' her as she has 'helped' so many before and will 'help' so many still to come. With Aggie thus as a satellite and a frequenter — in a degree in which she never yet HAS been," he continued, "what will the whole thing be but a practical multiplication of our points of contact? You may remind me of Mrs. Brook's contention that if she did in her time keep something of a saloon the saloon is now, in consequence of events, but a collection of fortuitous atoms; but that, my dear Nanda, will become none the less, to your clearer sense, but a pious echo of her momentary modesty or — call it at the worst — her momentary despair. The generations will come and go, and the PERSONNEL, as the newspapers say, of the saloon will shift and change, but the institution itself, as resting on a deep human need, has a long course yet to run and a good work yet to do. WE shan't last, but your mother will, and as Aggie is happily very young she's therefore provided for, in the time to come, on a scale sufficiently considerable to leave us just now at peace. Meanwhile, as you're almost as good for husbands as Mrs. Brook is for wives, why aren't we, as a couple, we Mitchys, quite ideally arranged for, and why mayn't I speak to you of my future as sufficiently guaranteed? The only appreciable shadow I make out comes, for me, from the question of what may to-day be between you and Mr. Longdon. Do I understand," Mitchy asked, "that he's presently to arrive for an answer to something he has put to you?" Nanda looked at him a while with a sort of solemnity of tenderness, and her voice, when she at last spoke, trembled with a feeling that clearly had grown in her as she listened to the string of whimsicalities, bitter and sweet, that he had just unrolled. "You're wild," she said simply— "you're wild."

He wonderfully glared. "Am I then already frightening you?" He shook his head rather sadly. "I'm not in the least trying yet. There's something," he added after an instant, "that I do want too awfully to ask you."

"Well then — !" If she had not eagerness she had at least charity.

"Oh but you see I reflect that though you show all the courage to go to the roots and depths with ME, I'm not — I never have been — fully conscious of the nerve for doing as much with you. It's a question," Mitchy explained, "of how much — of a particular matter — you know."

She continued ever so kindly to face him. "Hasn't it come out all round now that I know everything?"

Her reply, in this form, took a minute or two to operate, but when it began to do so it fairly diffused a light. Mitchy's face turned of a colour that might have been produced by her holding close to it some lantern wonderfully glazed. "You know, you know!" he then rang out.

"Of course I know."

"You know, you know!" Mitchy repeated.

"Everything," she imperturbably went on, "but what you're talking about."

He was silent a little, his eyes on her. "May I kiss your hand?"

"No," she answered: "that's what I call wild."

He had risen with his question and after her reply he remained a moment on the spot. "See — I've frightened you. It proves as easy as that. But I only wanted to show you and to be sure for myself. Now that

I've the mental certitude I shall never wish otherwise to use it." He turned away to begin again one of his absorbed revolutions. "Mr. Longdon has asked you this time for a grand public adhesion, and what he turns up for now is to receive your ultimatum? A final irrevocable flight with him is the line he advises, so that he'll be ready for it on the spot with the post-chaise and the pistols?"

The image appeared really to have for Nanda a certain vividness, and she looked at it a space without a hint of a smile. "We shan't need any pistols, whatever may be decided about the post-chaise; and any flight we may undertake together will need no cover of secrecy or night. Mother, as I've told you—"

"Won't fling herself across your reckless path? I remember," said Mitchy— "you alluded to her magnificent resignation. But father?" he oddly demanded.

Nanda thought for this a moment longer. "Well, Mr. Longdon has — off in the country — a good deal of shooting."

"So that Edward can sometimes come down with his old gun? Good then too — if it isn't, as he takes you by the way, to shoot YOU. You've got it all shipshape and arranged, in other words, and have only, if the fancy does move you, to clear out. You clear out — you make all sorts of room. It IS interesting," Mitchy exclaimed, "arriving thus with you at the depths! I look all round and see every one squared and every one but one or two suited. Why then reflexion and delay?"

"You don't, dear Mr. Mitchy," Nanda took her time to return, "know nearly as much as you think."

"But isn't my question absolutely a confession of ignorance and a renunciation of thought? I put myself from this moment forth with you," Mitchy declared, "on the footing of knowing nothing whatever and of receiving literally from your hands all information and all life. Let my continued attitude of dependence, my dear Nanda, show it. Any hesitation you may yet feel, you imply, proceeds from a sense of duties in London not to be lightly renounced? Oh," he thoughtfully said, "I do at least know you HAVE them."

She watched him with the same mildness while he vaguely circled about. "You're wild, you're wild," she insisted. "But it doesn't in the least matter. I shan't abandon you."

He stopped short. "Ah that's what I wanted from you in so many clear-cut golden words — though I won't in the least of course pretend that I've felt I literally need it. I don't literally need the big turquoise in my neck-tie; which incidentally means, by the way, that if you should admire it you're quite welcome to it. Such words — that's my point — are like such jewels: the pride, you see, of one's heart. They're mere vanity, but they help along. You've got of course always poor Tishy," he continued.

"Will you leave it all to ME?" Nanda said as if she had not heard him.

"And then you've got poor Carrie," he went on, "though HER of course you rather divide with your mother."

"Will you leave it all to ME?" the girl repeated.

"To say nothing of poor Cashmore," he pursued, "whom you take ALL, I believe, yourself?"

"Will you leave it all to ME?" she once more repeated.

This time he pulled up, suddenly and expressively wondering. "Are you going to do anything about it at present? — I mean with our friend?"

She appeared to have a scruple of saying, but at last she produced it. "Yes — he doesn't mind now."

Mitchy again laughed out. "You ARE, as a family — !" But he had already checked himself. "Mr. Longdon will at any rate, you imply, be somehow interested—"

"In MY interests? Of course — since he has gone so far. You expressed surprise at my wanting to wait and think; but how can I not wait and not think when so much depends on the question — now so definite — of how much further he WILL go?"

"I see," said Mitchy, profoundly impressed. "And how much does that depend on?"

She had to reflect. "On how much further I, for my part, MUST!"

Mitchy's grasp was already complete. "And he's coming then to learn from you how far this is?"

"Yes — very much."

Mitchy looked about for his hat. "So that of course I see my time's about up, as you'll want to be quite alone together."

Nanda glanced at the clock. "Oh you've a margin yet."

"But you don't want an interval for your thinking — ?"

"Now that I've seen you?" Nanda was already very obviously thoughtful.

"I mean if you've an important decision to take."

"Well," she returned, "seeing you HAS helped me."

"Ah but at the same time worried you. Therefore—" And he picked up his umbrella.

Her eyes rested on its curious handle. "If you cling to your idea that I'm frightened you'll be disappointed. It will never be given you to reassure me."

"You mean by that that I'm primarily so solid — !"

"Yes, that till I see you yourself afraid — !"

"Well?"

"Well, I won't admit that anything isn't exactly what I was prepared for."

Mitchy looked with interest into his hat. "Then what is it I'm to 'leave' to you?" After which, as she turned away from him with a suppressed sound and said, while he watched her, nothing else, "It's no doubt natural for you to talk," he went on, "but I do make you nervous. Good-bye — good-bye."

She had stayed him, by a fresh movement, however, as he reached the door. "Aggie's only trying to find out — !"

"Yes — what?" he asked, waiting.

"Why what sort of a person she is. How can she ever have known? It was carefully, elaborately hidden from her — kept so obscure that she could make out nothing. She isn't now like ME."

He wonderingly attended. "Like you?"

"Why I get the benefit of the fact that there was never a time when I didn't know SOMETHING or other, and that I became more and more aware, as I grew older, of a hundred little chinks of daylight."

Mitchy stared. "You're stupendous, my dear!" he murmured.

Ah but she kept it up. "*I* had my idea about Aggie."

"Oh don't I know you had? And how you were positive about the sort of person — !"

"That she didn't even suspect herself," Nanda broke in, "to be? I'm equally positive now. It's quite what I believed, only there's ever so much more of it. More HAS come — and more will yet. You see, when there has been nothing before, it all has to come with a rush. So that if even I'm surprised of course she is."

"And of course *I* am!" Mitchy's interest, though even now not wholly unqualified with amusement, had visibly deepened. "You admit then," he continued, "that you're surprised?"

Nanda just hesitated. "At the mere scale of it. I think it's splendid. The only person whose astonishment I don't quite understand," she added, "is Cousin Jane."

"Oh Cousin Jane's astonishment serves her right!"

"If she held so," Nanda pursued, "that marriage should do everything — !"

"She shouldn't be in such a funk at finding what it IS doing? Oh no, she's the last one!" Mitchy declared. "I vow I enjoy her scare."

"But it's very bad, you know," said Nanda.

"Oh too awful!"

"Well, of course," the girl appeared assentingly to muse, "she couldn't after all have dreamed — !" But she took herself up. "The great thing is to be helpful."

"And in what way — ?" Mitchy asked with his wonderful air of inviting competitive suggestions.

"Toward Aggie's finding herself. Do you think," she immediately continued, "that Lord Petherton really is?"

Mitchy frankly considered. "Helpful? Oh he does his best, I gather. Yes," he presently added— "Petherton's all right."

"It's you yourself, naturally," his companion threw off, "who can help most."

"Certainly, and I'm doing my best too. So that with such good assistance" — he seemed at last to have taken it all from her— "what is it, I again ask, that, as you request, I'm to 'leave' to you?"

Nanda required, while he still waited, some time to reply. "To keep my promise."

"Your promise?"

"Not to abandon you."

"Ah," cried Mitchy, "that's better!"

"Then good-bye," she said.

"Good-bye." But he came a few steps forward. "I MAYN'T kiss your hand?"

"Never."

"Never?"

“Never.”
“Oh!” he oddly sounded as he quickly went out.

IV

The interval he had represented as likely to be useful to her was in fact, however, not a little abbreviated by a punctuality of arrival on Mr. Longdon's part so extreme as to lead the first thing to a word almost of apology. "You can't say," her new visitor immediately began, "that I haven't left you alone, these many days, as much as I promised on coming up to you that afternoon when after my return to town I found Mr. Mitchett instead of your mother awaiting me in the drawing-room."

"Yes," said Nanda, "you've really done quite as I asked you."

"Well," he returned, "I felt half an hour ago that, near as I was to relief, I could keep it up no longer; so that though I knew it would bring me much too soon I started at six sharp for our trysting-place."

"And I've no tea, after all, to reward you!" It was but now clearly that she noticed it. "They must have removed the things without my heeding."

Her old friend looked at her with some intensity. "Were you in the room?"

"Yes — but I didn't see the man come in."

"What then were you doing?"

Nanda thought; her smile was as usual the faintest discernible outward sign. "Thinking of YOU."

"So tremendously hard?"

"Well, of other things too and of other persons. Of everything really that in our last talk I told you I felt I must have out with myself before meeting you for what I suppose you've now in mind."

Mr. Longdon had kept his eyes on her, but at this he turned away; not, however, for an alternative, embracing her material situation with the embarrassed optimism of Vanderbank or the mitigated gloom of Mitchy. "Ah" — he took her up with some dryness— "you've been having things out with yourself?" But he went on before she answered: "I don't want any tea, thank you. I found myself, after five, in such a fidget that I went three times in the course of the hour to my club, where I've the impression I each time had it. I dare say it wasn't there, though, I did have it," he after an instant pursued, "for I've somehow a confused image of a shop in Oxford Street — or was it rather in Regent? — into which I gloomily wandered to beguile the moments with a mixture that if I strike you as upset I beg you to set it all down to. Do you know in fact what I've been doing for the last ten minutes? Roaming hither and thither in your beautiful Crescent till I could venture to come in."

"Then did you see Mitchy go out? But no, you wouldn't" — Nanda corrected herself. "He has been gone longer than that."

Her visitor had dropped on a sofa where, propped by the back, he sat rather upright, his glasses on his nose, his hands in his pockets and his elbows much turned out. "Mitchy left you more than ten minutes ago, and yet your state on his departure remains such that there could be a bustle of servants in the room without your being aware? Kindly give me a lead then as to what it is he has done to you."

She hovered before him with her obscure smile. "You see it for yourself."

He shook his head with decision. "I don't see anything for myself, and I beg you to understand that it's not what I've come here to-day to do. Anything I may yet see which I don't already see will be only, I warn you, so far as you shall make it very clear. There — you've work cut out. And is it with Mr. Mitchett, may I ask, that you've been, as you mention, cutting it?"

Nanda looked about her as if weighing many things; after which her eyes came back to him. "Do you mind if I don't sit down?"

"I don't mind if you stand on your head — at the pass we've come to."

"I shall not try your patience," the girl good-humouredly replied, "so far as that. I only want you not to be worried if I walk about a little."

Mr. Longdon, without a movement, kept his posture. "Oh I can't oblige you there. I SHALL be worried. I've come on purpose to be worried, and the more I surrender myself to the rack the more, I seem to feel, we shall have threshed our business out. So you may dance, you may stamp, if you like, on the absolutely passive thing you've made of me."

"Well, what I HAVE had from Mitchy," she cheerfully responded, "is practically a lesson in dancing: by which I perhaps mean rather a lesson in sitting, myself, as I want you to do while *I* talk, as still as a mouse. They take," she declared, "while THEY talk, an amount of exercise!"

“They?” Mr. Longdon wondered. “Was his wife with him?”

“Dear no — he and Mr. Van.”

“Was Mr. Van with him?”

“Oh no — before, alone. All over the place.”

Mr. Longdon had a pause so rich in appeal that when he at last spoke his question was itself like an answer. “Mr. Van has been to see you?”

“Yes. I wrote and asked him.”

“Oh!” said Mr. Longdon.

“But don’t get up.” She raised her hand. “Don’t.”

“Why should I?” He had never budged.

“He was most kind; stayed half an hour and, when I told him you were coming, left a good message for you.”

Mr. Longdon appeared to wait for this tribute, which was not immediately produced. “What do you call a ‘good’ message?”

“I’m to make it all right with you.”

“To make what?”

“Why, that he has not, for so long, been to see you or written to you. That he has seemed to neglect you.”

Nanda’s visitor looked so far about as to take the neighbourhood in general into the confidence of his surprise. “To neglect ME?”

“Well, others too, I believe — with whom we’re not concerned. He has been so taken up. But you above all.”

Mr. Longdon showed on this a coldness that somehow spoke for itself as the greatest with which he had ever in his life met an act of reparation and that was infinitely confirmed by his sustained immobility. “But of what have I complained?”

“Oh I don’t think he fancies you’ve complained.”

“And how could he have come to see me,” he continued, “when for so many months past I’ve been so little in town?”

He was not more ready with objections, however, than his companion had by this time become with answers. “He must have been thinking of the time of your present stay. He evidently has you much on his mind — he spoke of not having seen you.”

“He has quite sufficiently tried — he has left cards,” Mr. Longdon returned. “What more does he want?”

Nanda looked at him with her long grave straight-ness, which had often a play of light beyond any smile. “Oh, you know, he does want more.”

“Then it was open to him—”

“So he so strongly feels” — she quickly took him up— “that you must have felt. And therefore it is I speak for him.”

“Don’t!” said Mr. Longdon.

“But I promised him I would.”

“Don’t!” her friend repeated as in stifled pain.

She had kept for the time all her fine clearness turned to him; but she might on this have been taken as giving him up with a movement of obedience and a strange soft sigh. The smothered sound might even have represented to a listener at all initiated a consenting retreat before an effort greater than her reckoning — a retreat that was in so far the snap of a sharp tension. The next minute, none the less, she evidently found a fresh provocation in the sight of the pale and positively excessive rigour she had imposed, so that, though her friend was only accommodating himself to her wish she had a sudden impulse of criticism. “You’re proud about it — too proud!”

“Well, what if I am?” He looked at her with a complexity of communication that no words could have meddled with. “Pride’s all right when it helps one to bear things.”

“Ah,” said Nanda, “but that’s only when one wants to take the least from them. When one wants to take the most — !”

“Well?” — he spoke, as she faltered, with a certain small hardness of interest.

She faltered, however, indeed. “Oh I don’t know how to say it.” She fairly coloured with the attempt. “One must let the sense of all that I speak of — well, all come. One must rather like it. I don’t know — but I

suppose one must rather grovel."

Mr. Longdon, though with visible reluctance, turned it over. "That's very fine — but you're a woman."

"Yes — that must make a difference. But being a woman, in such a case, has then," Nanda went on, "its advantages."

On this point perhaps her friend might presently have been taken as relaxing. "It strikes me that even at that the advantages are mainly for others. I'm glad, God knows, that you're not also a young man."

"Then we're suited all round."

She had spoken with a promptitude that appeared again to act on him slightly as an irritant, for he met it — with more delay — by a long and derisive murmur. "Oh MY pride — !" But this she in no manner took up; so that he was left for a little to his thoughts. "That's what you were plotting when you told me the other day that you wanted time?"

"Ah I wasn't plotting — though I was, I confess, trying to work things out. That particular idea of simply asking Mr. Van by letter to present himself — that particular flight of fancy hadn't in fact then at all occurred to me."

"It never occurred, I'm bound to say, to ME," said Mr. Longdon. "I've never thought of writing to him."

"Very good. But you haven't the reasons. I wanted to attack him."

"Not about me, I hope to God!" Mr. Longdon, distinctly a little paler, rejoined.

"Don't be afraid. I think I had an instinct of how you would have taken THAT. It was about mother."

"Oh!" said her visitor.

"He has been worse to her than to you," she continued. "But he'll make it all right."

Mr. Longdon's attention retained its grimness. "If he has such a remedy for the more then, what has he for the less?"

Nanda, however, was but for an instant checked.

"Oh it's I who make it up to YOU. To mother, you see, there's no one otherwise to make it up."

This at first unmistakeably sounded to him too complicated for acceptance. But his face changed as light dawned. "That puts it then that you WILL come?"

"I'll come if you'll take me as I am — which is what I must previously explain to you: I mean more than I've ever done before. But what HE means by what you call his remedy is my making you feel better about himself."

The old man gazed at her. "'Your' doing it is too beautiful! And he could really come to you for the purpose of asking you?"

"Oh no," said the girl briskly, "he came simply for the purpose of doing what he HAD to do. After my letter how could he not come? Then he met most kindly what I said to him for mother and what he quite understood to be all my business with him; so that his appeal to me to plead with you for — well, for his credit — was only thrown in because he had so good a chance."

This speech brought Mr. Longdon abruptly to his feet, but before she could warn him again of the patience she continued to need he had already, as if what she evoked for him left him too stupefied, dropped back into submission. "The man stood there for you to render him a service? — for you to help him and praise him?"

"Ah but it wasn't to go out of my way, don't you see? He knew you were presently to be here." Her anxiety that he should understand gave her a rare strained smile. "I mustn't make — as a request from him — too much of it, and I've not a doubt that, rather than that you should think any ill of him for wishing me to say a word, he would gladly be left with whatever bad appearance he may actually happen to have." She pulled up on these words as with a quick sense of their really, by their mere sound, putting her in deeper; and could only give her friend one of the looks that expressed: "If I could trust you not to assent even more than I want, I should say 'You know what I mean!'" She allowed him at all events — or tried to allow him — no time for uttered irony before going on: "He was everything you could have wished; quite as beautiful about YOU—"

"As about you?" — Mr. Longdon took her up.

She demurred. "As about mother." With which she turned away as if it handsomely settled the question.

But it only left him, as she went to the window, sitting there sombre. "I like, you know," he brought out as his eyes followed her, "your saying you're not proud! Thank God you ARE, my dear. Yes — it's better for us."

At this, after a moment, in her place, she turned round to him. "I'm glad I'm anything — whatever you may call it and though I can't call it the same — that's good for YOU."

He said nothing more for a little, as if by such a speech something in him were simplified and softened. “It would be good for me — by which I mean it would be easier for me — if you didn’t quite so immensely care for him.”

“Oh!” came from Nanda with an accent of attenuation at once so precipitate and so vague that it only made her attitude at first rather awkward. “Oh!” she immediately repeated, but with an increase of the same effect. After which, conscious, she made, as if to save herself, a quick addition. “Dear Mr. Longdon, isn’t it rather yourself most — ?”

“It would be easier for me,” he went on, heedless, “if you didn’t, my poor child, so wonderfully love him.”

“Ah but I don’t — please believe me when I assure you I DON’T!” she broke out. It burst from her, flaring up, in a queer quaver that ended in something queerer still — in her abrupt collapse, on the spot, into the nearest chair, where she choked with a torrent of tears. Her buried face could only after a moment give way to the flood, and she sobbed in a passion as sharp and brief as the flurry of a wild thing for an instant uncaged; her old friend meantime keeping his place in the silence broken by her sound and distantly — across the room — closing his eyes to his helplessness and her shame. Thus they sat together while their trouble both conjoined and divided them. She recovered herself, however, with an effort worthy of her fall and was on her feet again as she stammeringly spoke and angrily brushed at her eyes. “What difference in the world does it make — what difference ever?” Then clearly, even with the words, her checked tears suffered her to see how it made the difference that he too had been crying; so that “I don’t know why you mind!” she thereupon wailed with extravagance.

“You don’t know what I would have done for him. You don’t know, you don’t know!” he repeated — while she looked as if she naturally couldn’t — as with a renewal of his dream of beneficence and of the soreness of his personal wound.

“Well, but HE does you justice — he knows. So it shows, so it shows — !”

But in this direction too, unable to say what it showed, she had again broken down and again could only hold herself and let her companion sit there. “Ah Nanda, Nanda!” he deeply murmured; and the depth of the pity was, vainly and blindly, as the depth of a reproach.

“It’s I — it’s I, therefore,” she said as if she must then so look at it with him; “it’s I who am the horrible impossible and who have covered everything else with my own impossibility. For some different person you COULD have done what you speak of, and for some different person you can do it still.”

He stared at her with his barren sorrow. “A person different from him?”

“A person different from ME!”

“And what interest have I in any such person?”

“But your interest in me — you see well enough where THAT lands us.”

Mr. Longdon now got to his feet and somewhat stiffly remained; after which, for all answer, “You say you WILL come then?” he asked. Then as — seemingly with her last thought — she kept silent: “You understand clearly, I take it, that this time it’s never again to leave me — or to BE left.”

“I understand,” she presently replied. “Never again. That,” she continued, “is why I asked you for these days.”

“Well then, since you’ve taken them—”

“Ah but have YOU?” said Nanda. They were close to each other now, and with a tenderness of warning that was helped by their almost equal stature she laid her hand on his shoulder. “What I did more than anything else write to him for,” she had now regained her clearness enough to explain, “was that — with whatever idea you had — you should see for yourself how he could come and go.”

“And what good was that to do me? HADN’T I seen for myself?”

“Well — you’ve seen once more. Here he was. I didn’t care what he thought. Here I brought him. And his reasons remain.”

She kept her eyes on her companion’s face, but his own now and afterwards seemed to wander far. “What do I care for his reasons so long as they’re not mine?”

She thought an instant, still holding him gently and as if for successful argument. “But perhaps you don’t altogether understand them.”

“And why the devil, altogether, SHOULD I?”

“Ah because you distinctly want to,” said Nanda ever so kindly. “You’ve admitted as much when we’ve talked—”

“Oh but when HAVE we talked?” he sharply interrupted.

This time he had challenged her so straight that it was her own look that strayed. “When?”

“When.”

She hesitated. “When HAVEN’T we?”

“Well, YOU may have: if that’s what you call talking — never saying a word. But I haven’t. I’ve only to do at any rate, in the way of reasons, with my own.”

“And yours too then remain? Because, you know,” the girl pursued, “I AM like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like what he thinks.” Then so gravely that it was almost a supplication, “Don’t tell me,” she added, “that you don’t KNOW what he thinks. You do know.”

Their eyes, on that strange ground, could meet at last, and the effect of it was presently for Mr. Longdon. “I do know.”

“Well?”

“Well!” He raised his hands and took her face, which he drew so close to his own that, as she gently let him, he could kiss her with solemnity on the forehead. “Come!” he then very firmly said — quite indeed as if it were a question of their moving on the spot.

It literally made her smile, which, with a certain compunction, she immediately corrected by doing for him in the pressure of her lips to his cheek what he had just done for herself. “To-day?” she more seriously asked.

He looked at his watch. “To-morrow.”

She paused, but clearly for assent. “That’s what I mean by your taking me as I am. It IS, you know, for a girl — extraordinary.”

“Oh I know what it is!” he exclaimed with an odd fatigue in his tenderness.

But she continued, with the shadow of her scruple, to explain. “We’re many of us, we’re most of us — as you long ago saw and showed you felt — extraordinary now. We can’t help it. It isn’t really our fault. There’s so much else that’s extraordinary that if we’re in it all so much we must naturally be.” It was all obviously clearer to her than ever yet, and her sense of it found renewed expression; so that she might have been, as she wound up, a very much older person than her friend. “Everything’s different from what it used to be.”

“Yes, everything,” he returned with an air of final indoctrination. “That’s what he ought to have recognised.”

“As YOU have?” Nanda was once more — and completely now — enthroned in high justice. “Oh he’s more old-fashioned than you.”

“Much more,” said Mr. Longdon with a queer face.

“He tried,” the girl went on— “he did his best. But he couldn’t. And he’s so right — for himself.”

Her visitor, before meeting this, gathered in his hat and stick, which for a minute occupied his attention. “He ought to have married — !”

“Little Aggie? Yes,” said Nanda.

They had gained the door, where Mr. Longdon again met her eyes. “And then Mitchy — !”

But she checked him with a quick gesture. “No — not even then!”

So again before he went they were for a minute confronted. “Are you anxious about Mitchy?”

She faltered, but at last brought it out. “Yes. Do you see? There I am.”

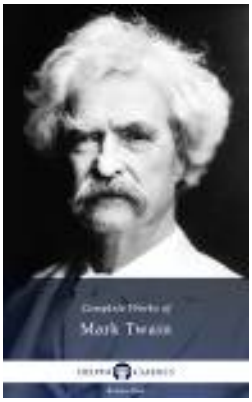
“I see. There we are. Well,” said Mr. Longdon— “to-morrow.”

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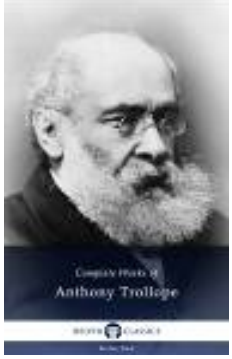
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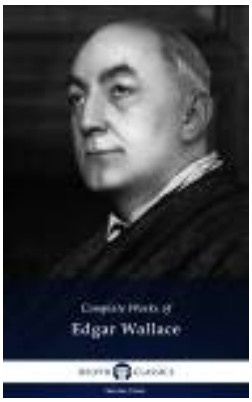
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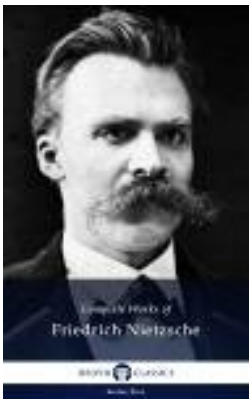
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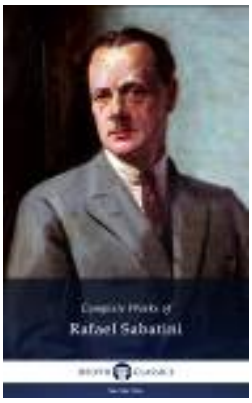
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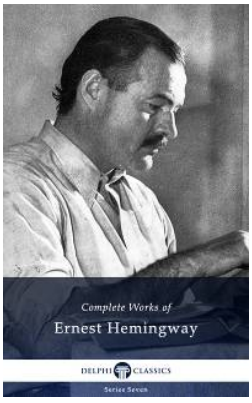
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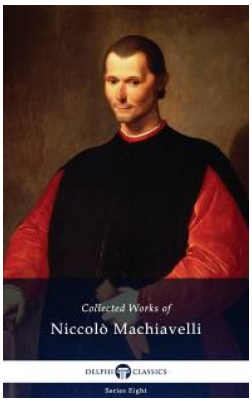
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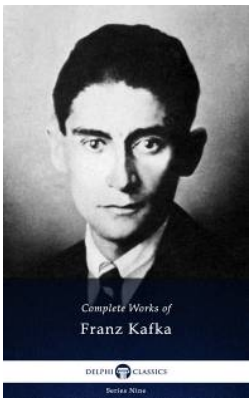
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W. W. Jacobs



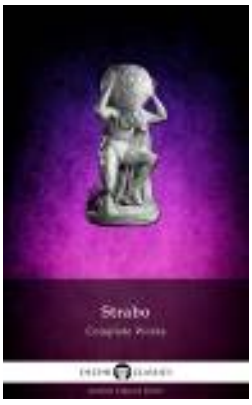
Series Eight

Anna Katharine Green
Arthur Schopenhauer
The Brothers Grimm
C. S. Lewis
Charles and Mary Lamb
Elizabeth von Arnim
Ernest Bramah
Francis Bacon
Gilbert and Sullivan
Grant Allen
Henryk Sienkiewicz
Hugh Walpole
Jean-Jacques Rousseau
John Locke
John Muir
Joseph Addison
Lafcadio Hearn
Lord Dunsany
Marie Corelli
Niccolò Machiavelli
Ouida
Richard Brinsley Sheridan
Sigmund Freud
Theodore Dreiser
Walter Pater
W. Somerset Maugham



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Aldous Huxley
August Strindberg
Booth Tarkington
C. S. Forester
Erasmus
Eugene Sue
Fergus Hume
Franz Kafka
Gertrude Stein
Giovanni Boccaccio
Izaak Walton
J. M. Synge
Johanna Spyri
John Galt
Maurice Leblanc
Max Brand
Molière
Norse Sagas
R. D. Blackmore
R. S. Surtees
Sir Thomas More
Stephen Leacock
The Harvard Classics
Thomas Love Peacock
Thomas Paine
William James



Ancient Classics

Achilles Tatius
Aeschylus
Ammianus Marcellinus
Apollodorus
Appian
Apuleius
Apollonius of Rhodes
Aristophanes
Aristotle
Arrian
Athenaeus
Augustine
Aulus Gellius
Bede

Cassius Dio
Cato
Catullus
Cicero
Claudian
Clement of Alexandria
Cornelius Nepos
Demosthenes
Dio Chrysostom
Diodorus Siculus
Dionysius of Halicarnassus
Diogenes Laërtius
Euripides
Frontius
Herodotus
Hesiod
Hippocrates
Homer
Horace
Isocrates
Josephus
Julian
Julius Caesar
Juvenal
Livy
Longus
Lucan
Lucian
Lucretius
Marcus Aurelius
Martial
Nonnus
Ovid
Pausanias
Petronius
Pindar
Plato
Plautus
Pliny the Elder
Pliny the Younger
Plotinus
Plutarch
Polybius
Procopius
Propertius
Quintus Curtius Rufus
Quintus Smyrnaeus
Sallust
Sappho
Seneca the Younger
Septuagint
Sextus Empiricus
Sidonius
Sophocles
Statius
Strabo
Suetonius
Tacitus
Terence
Theocritus
Thucydides
Tibullus
Varro
Virgil
Xenophon



Delphi Poets Series

A. E. Housman
Alexander Pope
Alfred, Lord Tennyson
Algernon Charles Swinburne
Andrew Marvell
Beowulf
Charlotte Smith
Christina Rossetti
D. H Lawrence (poetry)
Dante Alighieri (English)
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
Delphi Poetry Anthology
Edgar Allan Poe (poetry)
Edmund Spenser
Edward Lear
Edward Thomas
Edwin Arlington Robinson
Ella Wheeler Wilcox
Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Emily Dickinson
Epic of Gilgamesh
Ezra Pound
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Hafez
Heinrich Heine
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John Gower
John Keats
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Kahlil Gibran
Leigh Hunt
Lord Byron
Ludovico Ariosto
Luís de Camões
Matthew Arnold
Matthew Prior
Michael Drayton
Nikolai Nekrasov
Paul Laurence Dunbar
Percy Bysshe Shelley
Petrarch
Ralph Waldo Emerson
Robert Browning
Robert Burns
Robert Frost
Robert Southey

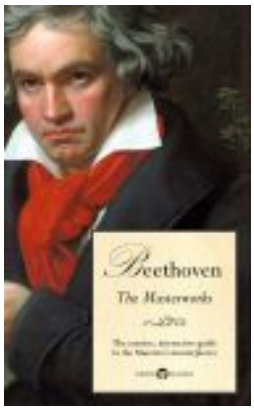
Rumi
Rupert Brooke
Samuel Taylor Coleridge
Sir Philip Sidney
Sir Thomas Wyatt
Sir Walter Raleigh
Thomas Chatterton
Thomas Gray
Thomas Hardy (poetry)
Thomas Hood
Thomas Moore
Torquato Tasso
T. S. Eliot
W. B. Yeats
Walter Savage Landor
Walt Whitman
Wilfred Owen
William Blake
William Cowper
William Wordsworth



Masters of Art

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Amedeo Modigliani
Artemisia Gentileschi
Camille Pissarro
Canaletto
Caravaggio
Caspar David Friedrich
Claude Lorrain
Claude Monet
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
Diego Velázquez
Donatello
Edgar Degas
Édouard Manet
Edvard Munch
El Greco
Eugène Delacroix
Francisco Goya
Giotto
Giovanni Bellini
Gustave Courbet
Gustav Klimt
Hieronymus Bosch
Jacques-Louis David
James Abbott McNeill Whistler
J. M. W. Turner
Johannes Vermeer
John Constable
Leonardo da Vinci
Michelangelo
Paul Cézanne
Paul Gauguin
Paul Klee
Peter Paul Rubens
Piero della Francesca
Pierre-Auguste Renoir
Pieter Bruegel the Elder
Sandro Botticelli

Raphael
Rembrandt van Rijn
Thomas Gainsborough
Tintoretto
Titian
Vincent van Gogh
Wassily Kandinsky



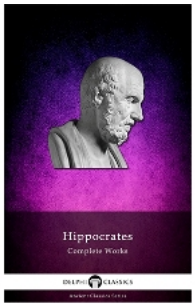
Great Composers

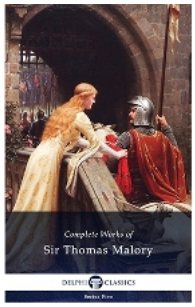
Antonín Dvořák
Franz Schubert
Johann Sebastian Bach
Joseph Haydn
Ludwig van Beethoven
Piotr Illitch Tchaïkovsky
Richard Wagner
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Alphabetical List of Titles









A. E. Housman
Achilles Tatius
Adam Smith
Aeschylus
Albrecht Dürer
Aldous Huxley
Alexander Pope
Alexander Pushkin
Alexandre Dumas (English)
Alfred, Lord Tennyson
Algernon Blackwood
Algernon Charles Swinburne
Ambrose Bierce
Amedeo Modigliani
Ammianus Marcellinus
Anatole France
Andrew Lang
Andrew Marvell
Ann Radcliffe
Anna Katharine Green
Anthony Hope
Anthony Trollope
Anton Chekhov
Antonín Dvořák
Aphra Behn
Apollodorus

Apollonius of Rhodes
Appian
Apuleius
Aristophanes
Aristotle
Arnold Bennett
Arrian
Artemisia Gentileschi
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Arthur Morrison
Arthur Schopenhauer
Athenaeus
August Strindberg
Augustine
Aulus Gellius
Baroness Emma Orczy
Beatrix Potter
Beaumont and Fletcher
Bede
Ben Jonson
Benjamin Disraeli
Beowulf
Booth Tarkington
Bram Stoker
Bret Harte
C. S. Forester
C. S. Lewis
Camille Pissarro
Canaletto
Captain Frederick Marryat
Captain Mayne Reid
Caravaggio
Caspar David Friedrich
Cassius Dio
Cato
Catullus
Charles and Mary Lamb
Charles Darwin
Charles Dickens
Charles Kingsley
Charles Lever
Charles Reade
Charlotte M. Yonge
Charlotte Perkins Gilman
Charlotte Smith
Christina Rossetti
Christopher Marlowe
Cicero
Claude Lorrain
Claude Monet
Claudian
Clement of Alexandria
Confucius
Cornelius Nepos
D. H Lawrence (poetry)
D.H. Lawrence
Daniel Defoe
Dante Alighieri (English)
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
David Hume
Delphi Poetry Anthology
Demosthenes
Dickensiana Volume I
Diego Velázquez
Dio Chrysostom
Diodorus Siculus
Diogenes Laërtius
Dionysius of Halicarnassus
Donatello
E. F. Benson
E. M. Delafield
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E. Nesbit
E. Phillips Oppenheim
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Edgar Allan Poe

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Edgar Degas
Edgar Rice Burroughs
Edgar Wallace
Edith Wharton
Edmund Burke
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Édouard Manet
Edvard Munch
Edward Bulwer-Lytton
Edward Gibbon
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Edward Thomas
Edwin Arlington Robinson
El Greco
Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Elizabeth Gaskell
Elizabeth von Arnim
Ella Wheeler Wilcox
Ellen Wood
Émile Zola
Emily Dickinson
Epic of Gilgamesh
Erasmus
Ernest Bramah
Ernest Hemingway
Eugène Delacroix
Eugene Sue
Euripides
Ezra Pound
F. Scott Fitzgerald
Fergus Hume
Ford Madox Ford
Frances Burney
Frances Hodgson Burnett
Frances Trollope
Francis Bacon
Francisco Goya
Frank Norris
Frank R. Stockton
Franz Kafka
Franz Schubert
Friedrich Nietzsche
Friedrich Schiller (English)
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Fyodor Dostoyevsky
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G. K. Chesterton
Galileo Galilei
Geoffrey Chaucer
George Bernard Shaw
George Chapman
George Eliot
George Gissing
George Herbert
George MacDonald
George Meredith
George Orwell
Gerard Manley Hopkins
Gertrude Stein
Gertrude Stein
Gilbert and Sullivan
Giotto
Giovanni Bellini
Giovanni Boccaccio
Grant Allen
Gustav Klimt
Gustave Courbet
Gustave Flaubert (English)
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Guy de Maupassant
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H. P. Lovecraft
H. Rider Haggard
Hafez
Hall Caine
Hans Christian Andersen

Harriet Beecher Stowe
Heinrich Heine
Henrik Ibsen
Henry David Thoreau
Henry Fielding
Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey
Henry James
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
Henryk Sienkiewicz
Herman Melville
Herodotus
Hesiod
Hieronymus Bosch
Hilaire Belloc
Hippocrates
Homer
Honoré de Balzac (English)
Horace
Horace Walpole
Hugh Walpole
Ian Fleming
Immanuel Kant
Isaac Rosenberg
Isocrates
Ivan Turgenev
Izaak Walton
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J. M. W. Turner
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James Fenimore Cooper
James Joyce
James Russell Lowell
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Jean-Jacques Rousseau
Jerome K. Jerome
Johan Ludvig Runeberg
Johann Sebastian Bach
Johanna Spyri
Johannes Vermeer
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John Bunyan
John Clare
John Constable
John Donne
John Dryden
John Galsworthy
John Galt
John Gower
John Keats
John Locke
John Milton
John Muir
John Ruskin
John Webster
John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester
Jonathan Swift
Joseph Addison
Joseph Addison
Joseph Conrad
Joseph Haydn
Josephus
Jules Verne
Julian
Julius Caesar
Juvenal
Kahlil Gibran
Karl Marx
Kate Chopin
Katherine Mansfield
Kenneth Grahame
L. Frank Baum
L. M. Montgomery
Lafcadio Hearn

Laurence Sterne
Leigh Hunt
Leo Tolstoy
Leonardo da Vinci
Lewis Carroll
Livy
Longus
Lord Byron
Lord Dunsany
Louisa May Alcott
Lucan
Lucian
Lucretius
Ludovico Ariosto
Ludwig van Beethoven
Luís de Camões
Lytton Strachey
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M. R. James
Marcel Proust (English)
Marcus Aurelius
Margaret Oliphant
Maria Edgeworth
Marie Corelli
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Martial
Mary Shelley
Mary Wollstonecraft
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Matthew Prior
Maurice Leblanc
Max Brand
Maxim Gorky
Michael Drayton
Michel de Montaigne
Michelangelo
Miguel de Cervantes
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Nathaniel Hawthorne
Niccolò Machiavelli
Nikolai Gogol
Nikolai Nekrasov
Nonnus
Norse Sagas
O. Henry
Oliver Goldsmith
One Thousand and One Nights
Oscar Wilde
Ouida
Ovid
Paul Cézanne
Paul Gauguin
Paul Klee
Paul Laurence Dunbar
Pausanias
Percy Bysshe Shelley
Peter Paul Rubens
Petrarch
Petronius
Piero della Francesca
Pierre-Auguste Renoir
Pieter Bruegel the Elder
Pindar
Piotr Illitch Tchaïkovsky
Plato
Plautus
Pliny the Elder
Pliny the Younger
Plotinus
Plutarch
Polybius
Procopius
Propertius
Quintus Curtius Rufus
Quintus Smyrnaeus
R. Austin Freeman
R. D. Blackmore

R. M. Ballantyne
R. S. Surtees
Radclyffe Hall
Rafael Sabatini
Ralph Waldo Emerson
Raphael
Rembrandt van Rijn
René Descartes
Richard Brinsley Sheridan
Richard Marsh
Richard Wagner
Robert Browning
Robert Burns
Robert E. Howard
Robert Frost
Robert Louis Stevenson
Robert Southey
Robert W. Chambers
Rudyard Kipling
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Rupert Brooke
Saki
Sallust
Samuel Butler
Samuel Johnson
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Samuel Richardson
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Sandro Botticelli
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Sax Rohmer
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Septuagint
Sextus Empiricus
Sheridan Le Fanu
Sidonius
Sigmund Freud
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
Sir Issac Newton
Sir Philip Sidney
Sir Richard Burton
Sir Thomas Malory
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Tacitus
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Thomas De Quincey
Thomas Gainsborough
Thomas Gray
Thomas Hardy
Thomas Hardy (poetry)
Thomas Hood
Thomas Love Peacock
Thomas Middleton
Thomas Moore
Thomas Paine
Thucydides

Tibullus
Tintoretto
Titian
Tobias Smollett
Torquato Tasso
Varro
Victor Hugo
Vincent van Gogh
Virgil
Virginia Woolf
Voltaire
W. B. Yeats
W. Somerset Maugham
W. W. Jacobs
Walt Whitman
Walter Pater
Walter Savage Landor
Washington Irving
Wassily Kandinsky
Wilfred Owen
Wilkie Collins
William Blake
William Cowper
William Dean Howells
William Harrison Ainsworth
William Hazlitt
William Hope Hodgson
William James
William Makepeace Thackeray
William Morris
William Shakespeare
William Wordsworth
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Xenophon
Zane Grey

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Henry James

La edad ingrata



La edad ingrata (*The Awkward Age*, 1899), hasta ahora inédita en castellano, es una de las grandes novelas de la madurez de Henry James. En palabras del propio autor, la semilla de esta obra «brotó de este vasto criadero de insinuaciones penetrantes e imágenes concretas que se denominan, en aras de la brevedad, Londres» y aludía a «la tribulación surgida en ciertas mansiones amistosas y para ciertas madres prósperas ante el a veces temido, a menudo demorado, pero nunca plenamente impedido acceso a primera línea de alguna borrosa hija llegada a la edad de merecer… Fácilmente podía concebirse como un drama el "poder sentarse en el salón", a partir de una fecha determinada, de una inmisericorde joven virginal anteriormente confinada en el piso superior. Semejante drama, y la consecuencia del mismo en los personajes más directamente involucrados, debe ser reconocido valerosamente como la primigenia fuerza motriz de *La edad ingrata*». Una vez más, la sutileza analítica de James y sus extraordinarias condiciones de escritor nos deparan, sobre este aparentemente liviano cañamazo inicial, la cabal plenitud de una obra maestra.

Henry James

La edad ingrata

ePub r1.0
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Henry James, 1899
Traducción: Fernando Jadraque
Cubierta: «Mrs. Fiske Warren y su hija Rachel», óleo de John Singer Sargent

Editor digital: Titivillus
ePub base r1.2



NOTA DEL TRADUCTOR

La edad ingrata hizo su primera aparición pública en la revista Harper's Weekly, en catorce entregas semanales entre octubre de 1898 y enero de 1899. Luego fue publicada en forma de libro por la editorial William Heinemann en abril de 1899. Posteriormente, en 1908, fue reeditada en el tomo IX de la «Edición de Nueva York».

Fue ésta una de las narraciones que menos retocó y modificó James en la reedición neoyorquina, tal vez por la casi absoluta preponderancia que dentro de ella tiene el diálogo. Estos retoques y modificaciones consistieron casi exclusivamente en la supresión de un buen número de comas y la alteración del orden de los elementos de la oración en múltiples frases. Teniendo en cuenta las diferencias entre los usos ingleses y españoles de la puntuación y que, debido a su sintaxis algo más rígida, la lengua inglesa marca con mayor claridad las jerarquías gramaticales dentro de las oraciones compuestas, se ha juzgado que la primera versión en forma de libro de La edad ingrata *es más apropiada, a la hora de realizar una versión española, que la edición revisada diez años después. Consiguientemente, es la que se ha utilizado para llevar a cabo la presente traducción, si bien no por ello deja de incluirse el prefacio que el autor compuso para la versión revisada, prefacio que posee idéntica validez para la primigenia.*

FERNANDO JADRAQUE

PREFACIO DEL AUTOR

Con suprema facilidad me acuerdo de la ocurrencia en que tuvo su origen *La edad ingrata*, mas una reciente relectura me exige un momento de reflexión antes de consignarla. Esta composición, tal como quedó, constituye, a mi modo de ver —y tal vez lo habrá hecho aún más al de sus lectores—, una masa tan desaforada en comparación con la semilla enterrada en ella y acaso todavía discernible, que me siento cuasimovido a dejar irrevelado mi pequeño secreto. No voy a ser capaz de hallar, creo, en el curso de estos copiosos comentarios[1], ningún ejemplo mejor, y ninguno a cuenta del cual me aventuraré a solicitar mayor atención, de la absolutamente imprevisible tendencia de un simple grano de tema a expandirse y desarrollarse y acaparar la tierra labrantía cuando por un acaso se ve favorecido por una serie de circunstancias propicias. Queda dicho todo, sin duda, si declaro que esta obra fue planeada, con entera buena fe, como dotada de un carácter breve, etéreo, sencillo, festivo, en definitiva, y de una indolente jocundidad. Yo había invocado, a modo de protección, el espíritu de la comedia más ligera, mas *La edad ingrata* iba a terminar encuadrándose en un grupo de producciones, aquí relanzadas, que tienen en común, a ojos de su autor, el entrañable marchamo de que en todos los casos se empecinaron en una imprevista determinación de agrandarse. Habían sido proyectadas como obras cortas, y sin embargo finalmente hubieron de ser trabajadas hasta quedar como relativos mamotretos. Tal es el calificativo que yo les aplico, si bien quizá me sentiría herido de verlo aplicado por cualquier otro crítico… sobre todo en el caso de la creación que ante nosotros tenemos, cuya cuidadosa medida he podido volver a tomar recientemente. El resultado de esta valoración ha sido en primer lugar volver otra vez agudo para mí el interés de todo el proceso aquí ejemplificado, y en segundo emplazarme en unas relaciones inesperadamente cordiales con la propia novela. Al rastrear mi bibliografía no encuentro ninguna otra obra cuyo «historial» abarque un mayor número de hechos instructivos… o por lo menos de hechos ante los cuales se vean tan fecundadas las facultades reflexivas. Las obras terminadas y puestas en circulación tienen siempre, aun en el mejor de los casos, para el artesano ambicioso, la costumbre de parecer muertas cuando no enterradas, por lo cual éste casi se estremece de arrobamiento cuando, durante una ansiosa revisión, reaparecen signos de actividad vital. A ciencia cierta es por haber advertido dichos signos en un aspecto entero de *La edad ingrata* por lo que la motejo toda, aunque con la mayor ternura del mundo, como un mamotreto… lo cual no es sino mi modo de constatar la *cantidad* de acabado que se oculta dentro de ella. Ya que hablo tan sin tapujos, siempre que hace falta, acerca del valor de una regla de composición integral, no me andaré por las ramas a la hora de reclamar para estas páginas el máximo de semejante mérito. Si en esta cuestión es posible tamaña proeza como la constituye el extraer realmente de una aventura propia una lección, creo que esta vez no he dejado de lograrla; y debo decir que me siento apremiado a dejar mucho mayor constancia del obtenido provecho de lo que puedo esperar plasmar aquí solventemente. De esta guisa es como, todavía con un remanente de pundonor, o por lo menos de cordura, quien esto escribe puede volcarse en complacencias, puede regocijarse con orgullo. Arriesguémonos a que mi orgullo suscite miradas ceñudas mientras yo no lo haya justificado satisfactoriamente; lo cual —aun cuando hay más asuntos que piden ser constatados aquí de lo que el espacio disponible permite— paso a hacer ahora mismo.

Y, sin embargo, primero debo arrostrar gallardamente mi turbación, no cabe duda, y presentar en su originaria humildad mi semilla chiquita pero matona. Esta semilla brotó de ese vasto criadero de insinuaciones penetrantes e imágenes concretas que se denomina, en aras de la brevedad, Londres; incluso pertenecía a la categoría de los pequeños «fenómenos sociales» de que, como frutos para el observador, rebosa este el más imponente de los árboles de la sugerencia. Indubitablemente no era un exquisito melocotón púrpura, pero sí podía pasar por una rotunda ciruela en sazón, la percepción que

inevitablemente servidor había tenido de la tribulación surgida en ciertas mansiones amistosas y para ciertas madres prósperas ante el a veces temido, a menudo demorado, pero nunca plenamente impedido acceso a primera línea de alguna borrosa hija llegada a la edad de merecer. Para que las amables revoluciones semejantes a ésta no siguieran siendo, en la imaginación propia, amables, uno no tenía más remedio que ser, a buen seguro, infinitamente adicto a «percibir»; bajo la égida de este vicio secreto o de este aprovechamiento deshonesto, en cualquier caso, fácilmente podía concebirse como un drama el «poder sentarse en el salón», a partir de una fecha determinada, de una inmisericorde joven virginal anteriormente confinada en el piso superior. Semejante drama, y la conciencia del mismo en los personajes más directamente involucrados, debe ser reconocido valerosamente como la primigenia fuerza motriz de *La edad ingrata*. Un conflicto de ese tipo podía constituir una base insuficiente para un «libro gordo», y de hecho, en los inicios, yo no había soñado con ningún libro gordo, sino tan sólo con uno cautivadoramente flaquito. Para la escala prevista aquel pequeño argumento parecía afortunado (afortunado, es decir, sobre todo por haber llegado a mis manos de manera asaz directa); pero es que la escala prevista estaba comprendida dentro de los límites de un pequeño lienzo cuadrado. Una y otra vez servidor había presenciado la situación a que hago alusión (que es a lo que me refiero con eso de la manera «asaz directa» en que había llegado a mis manos aquella peculiar impresión londinense); y, aun así, servidor fue capaz —por culpa de falibilidades que al fin y al cabo no están desprovistas de encanto, hasta el punto de que en general uno preferiría conservarlas antes que deshacerse de ellas— de una medición tan consumadamente errónea. De hecho, cuando pienso en aquellas de mis muchas mediciones erróneas que han dado como resultado, tras numerosas angustias, bonitas simetrías, considero que todo este asunto, decididamente, es una buena materia para los filósofos. Los pequeños argumentos que uno nunca habría tratado salvo bajo la determinación de mantenerlos pequeños, las situaciones acrecidas que uno nunca habría tomado a su cargo con premeditación y alevosía, las historias largas que se habían propuesto firmemente ser breves, los temas breves que habían conspirado solapadamente para ser largos, la hipocresía de comienzos humildes, el descaro de centros desplazados, la victoria de intenciones nunca albergadas… de estas chapuzas, cuando me entrego a una retrospección, veo que está empedrada mi experiencia: una experiencia a la cual no le falta nada excepto, lo confieso, una competente asimilación de su moraleja final.

Seguramente esa moraleja proporcionaría, de ser eficiente, algún método para la identificación, el cálculo anticipado, de los precisos límites y la precisa extensión de un argumento, cualquier argumento, atractivo y que no obstante, en virtud de las probables, las orientadoras reglas de los argumentos, debe tener sus trampas no menos que sus riquezas. El narrador se fija en un argumento porque le parece rico, y se dedica a él, a menudo, justamente porque asimismo discierne, o eso cree él, dónde se desvanece a efectos prácticos dicha riqueza. Sin ir más lejos, parecía tan limitada como esplendente la riqueza de la anécdota que hace un momento he consignado: la anécdota de las restricciones que debe autoimponerse —a causa de una presencia nueva, ingenua y nada avezada— un círculo de amigos acostumbrados a charlar de un modo libérrimo, un círculo al cual jamás se le había presentado la necesidad de someterse a tales limitaciones a ese respecto; y si estas páginas no estuvieran ante nosotros para dar fe de mi espejismo, yo nunca le habría concedido a semejante anécdota mayores posibilidades. Estas mismas páginas me amonestan —aunque sea en un centenar de maneras apasionantes— y me recalcan encarecidamente esa verdad consistente en la futilidad de un examen apriorístico de las posibilidades de una *idée-mère*. Lo cierto es que las posibilidades de cualquier ocurrencia feliz dependen inmensamente de los vaivenes de la mente capaz de darla a luz y del hecho de que el leal propietario de ésta, que cultiva cuidadosamente las posibles relaciones y expansiones de la ocurrencia, la brillante florescencia latente en la misma, pero que asimismo ha de prestar una debida atención a otras cosas, está totalmente a merced de su propia mente. Ese órgano no tiene sino que exhalar, hasta donde se halla a su alcance, una vigorizante brisa tropical para crear complicaciones sin cuento. La celada tendida contra la aparente ventaja de un narrador en posesión de un tema estriba en que, aun cuando las relaciones de una figura humana o un hecho social son lo que vuelve interesantes tales entes, asimismo los vuelven, en la misma medida, difíciles de aislar, de delimitar por una gruesa línea negra, de enmarcar en el rectángulo, el círculo, el encantador óvalo, que contribuye a que cualquier disposición de objetos se constituya en un cuadro. El narrador sólo tiene que haber sido condenado por la naturaleza a poseer una concepción de las relaciones generosamente fascinada y seducida, abundosamente compleja, y una refinada conciencia de las mismas inquisitiva y especulativa, para verse por momentos extraviado en una enmarañada y sofocante selva. Ésos son los momentos en que recuerda pesaroso que el gran mérito de tal o cual pequeña anécdota, el mérito que le aconsejó apropiársela para trabajarla, había sido precisamente la pequeñez.

Sin más dilaciones puedo decir que ésa me había parecido, en la primera agitación identificatoria, la

seductora cualidad de la bonita idea de un «círculo libérrimo» condicionado, de sopetón, por una mente ingenua y un par de límpidos ojos escrutadores que han de ser tomados en cuenta. La mitad del atractivo residía en la rabiosa actualidad del tema: repetidamente, a diestra y siniestra, como ya he dicho, servidor había visto erigirse un drama así, y siempre con el resultado de ofrecerle a la atención curiosa una de esas interrogantes que son la esencia misma del dramatismo: ¿qué ocurrirá, quién saldrá perdiendo, quién saldrá ganando, qué rumbo tomará la coyuntura, a qué encrucijada se llegará, qué salida se encontrará? Naturalmente tenía que estar, como cimiento, el círculo libérrimo, pero éste era un material de esa admirable índole con que el buen Londres nunca deja de obsequiar a sus fieles amantes y acólitos. Quien esto escribe podía contar con los dedos de una mano (y le habrían sobrado dedos) las generosas chimeneas cerca de cuyo amplio resplandor, en una relativa penumbra, rondaba y atendía sin mayor problema la adolescencia femenina. El amplio resplandor era animado, era propicio a charlas «sustanciosas», al intercambio de pareceres y experiencias, a un abierto interés por los hechos de la vida, a una debida manifestación de tal interés por parte de personas capacitadas para sentirlo: todo lo cual significaba franqueza y confidencialidad, la perfección, casi, por así decirlo, de la comunicación, y un tono lo más alejado posible del de la inocencia y el candor… incluso lo más alejado posible, no cabe duda, en su rompedora «modernidad», del de las supuestamente audaces escenas de conversación de veinte años atrás. El encanto estaba, junto con un centenar de otras cosas, en la libertad de tono: una libertad amenazada por la inevitable irrupción de la mente ingenua; de ahí que, si la libertad iba a ser sacrificada, ¿qué iba a *pasar* con el encanto? Ese encanto podía imaginarse como muy querido para los miembros del círculo que contribuían a él conscientemente, mas no por ello dejaba de ser obvio que habría que hacer algún sacrificio en uno u otro sentido, y ¿qué meditador digno de tal nombre podía evitar contener la respiración mientras permanecía a la espera del desarrollo de los acontecimientos? La mente ingenua podía, cierto es, ser suprimida por completo, y el disgusto colectivo evitado gracias a alguna sibilina maniobra diplomática o alguna brusca interdicción tajante; y sin embargo éstos eran procedimientos feos, y en los ejemplos que tuvieron lugar ante los ojos propios no había habido atisbo de nada feo, nada brutal o crudo. Una muchacha podía ser expeditivamente casada el día siguiente a su irrupción, o mejor aún el día anterior, para alejarla de la esfera del intercambio de pareceres y experiencias; mas éstas no eran exactamente crudezas, e incluso en esos casos, poniéndonos en lo peor, siempre había que afrontar un intervalo. *La edad ingrata* es precisamente un análisis de uno de esos abreviados o dilatados periodos de tensión y aprensión, una crónica de la manera como en un caso particular es enfrentada la deplorada interferencia sobre veteranas libertades.

Una vez más hago notar que yo no había dejado de ver esa interferencia como enfrentada activa y relatablemente… tras (lo admito) una buena dosis de grato suspense; y asimismo con la naturaleza y el grado de aquel «sacrificio» confiados casi por entero a la facultad apreciativa propia. En los círculos pulcramente educados las cosas grandes, las cosas auténticas, las cosas duras, crueles o incluso tiernas, los verdaderos ingredientes de cualquier tensión y los verdaderos hechos de cualquier crisis, siempre deben, para uso del ajeno, del valorador, ser traducidos a palabras… palabras en cuyo distinguido nombre, palabras para cuyo certero empleo, se me había antojado irresistiblemente idónea más de una situación de la índole que aquí describo. De hecho, por momentos habían parecido no tener fin las insinuaciones que tales situaciones desprendían, las sugerencias que brindaban: una de las cuales alcanzó particularmente la máxima intensidad. Iluminando vívidamente ante quien esto escribe el perfecto sistema con que es manejada la edad del pavo en la mayoría de las demás sociedades europeas, dicha sugerencia puso nuevamente de relieve la inveterada costumbre inglesa de las componendas tan bienintencionadas en los propósitos como inoperantes en los resultados. Es notorio que vivimos, tal como supongo que lo hacen todas las eras, en una «época de transición»; pero, aun así, de los franceses por ejemplo puede decirse, lo doy por sentado, que su esquema social está absolutamente pertrechado contra las situaciones embarazosas. Dicho en otros términos: según tal esquema, resultaría tan infinitamente embarazoso, embarazoso más allá de cualquier disimulo, siquiera concebir que las incipientes jovencitas estuvieran presentes durante las charlas «sustanciosas», que su presencia no es, al menos teóricamente, tolerada hasta que su adolescencia haya sido prestamente corregida por el matrimonio… en cuyo caso automáticamente cesan de ser simples adolescentes. Cuanto más sustanciosa es la charla que se practica en cualquier círculo, tanto más organizado, tanto más completo, en consecuencia, es el dispositivo de prevención y exclusión. La charla —entendiendo esta palabra en su sentido más amplio— y la decorosa inexperiencia son vistas como incompatibles; y a un pueblo lógico nunca se le ha pasado por la cabeza que el interés de los más, de los mayores, haya de ser sacrificado al interés de los menos, de los menores. Tales sacrificios le parecen gratuitos y monstruosos, sobre todo crueles respecto de la inteligencia social; y asimismo perfectamente

evitables mediante sabias disposiciones. Al observador de las costumbres inglesas, por el contrario, nada se le hace más patente que la muy parva frecuencia con que se ha recurrido jamás a disposiciones sabias, en el sentido francés de una economía científica: un hecho que de veras explica satisfactoriamente lo llamativo de la incoherencia, la heterogeneidad, la descontrolada multiplicidad de las costumbres inglesas. Los franceses, de un modo cabalmente analítico, han ideado un centenar de diversos recursos, aplicables a un centenar de diversos casos, mientras que el intelecto inglés, menos intensamente activo, nunca ha ideado más que uno: el grandioso recurso, aplicado a todo caso, hay que decirlo con franqueza, de sencillamente ser inglés. Dado que por necesidad, empero, la práctica es siempre algo menos riguroso que la teoría, en el mundo londinense no ha sido factible ninguna aplicación de dicho exquisito decoro sin incurrir en mil desviaciones respecto del estricto ideal.

La teoría norteamericana, si puedo «darle vela en este entierro», consistiría, creo, en que la charla nunca debe ser más «sustanciosa» de lo que hayan sido formadas para asimilarla las adolescentes presentes de hecho o en potencia. *Ese* sistema tiene tan poco que ver con las componendas como el sistema francés: es meridianamente sencillo, y lo singular de su éxito resplandece en cualquier crónica de nuestras condiciones de interrelación… tomando siempre como premisa nuestra suposición «primaria» de que las adolescentes leen los periódicos. La teoría inglesa puede ser en sí misma casi igual de sencilla, pero han regido su aplicación fuerzas distintas y mucho más complejas; pues en inmensa medida la sustanciosidad de la charla depende de los temas sobre los cuales charlar. En Londres, me da la impresión, hay más temas que en ninguna otra parte del mundo; y aquí reside la fascinación de la dramática lucha reflejada en mi libro: la lucha para, de algún modo, limar con urbanidad las posibles aristas de un fácil caso ideal que a la hora de la verdad está todo el rato complicándose y descomponiéndose en difíciles casos reales. Por supuesto el círculo que rodea a la señora Brookenham, en mis páginas, no es sino un caso real, incluso podría decirse «peculiar»… y sus más bien infructuosos esfuerzos (siendo precisamente parte esencial de mi relato la infructuosidad, la crasa impericia) están orientados a salvaguardar la audacia de esta última característica. Dicho círculo ha aflorado dentro de un orden social donde no han sido oficialmente fomentadas las apreciaciones personales de qué es o no decoroso, pese a que, como es natural, con harta frecuencia semejantes apreciaciones han brotado de una manera bastante brusca y violenta e insolente más bien que soterrada; conque tal como están las cosas, para bien o para mal, la retardada aunque finalmente efectiva incorporación de Nanda implica virtualmente el abandono de Nanda a la intemperie. Implica esto, es decir, y muchas cosas más (las implica para la propia Nanda y, con variada intensidad, para los demás involucrados en el drama); pero lo que especialmente implica, sin duda, es el fracaso de las disposiciones tortuosas y la mismísima moraleja, agudamente obvia, de cuáles son los frutos de las componendas. Son las componendas lo que ha permitido que Nanda llegue a quedar en entredicho y lo que ha condenado la libertad de su círculo a ser autoconsciente, contrita y en conjunto mucho más modosa que audaz… pero mientras que el consiguiente alboroto, si la palabra no resulta en exceso desproporcionada, significaría un gran inconveniente en la vida real, me veo sintiendo que significa una enorme ventaja, una ventaja mucho mayor de lo que lo sería en cualquier escenario «extranjero», a la hora de realizar una pintura de la vida. Aparte lo cual, toléreseme agregar que aquí prestamente encontramos un insuperable ejemplo del modo en que las difusas, las acechantes posibilidades de un tema aparentemente simple, siempre a la espera de una oportunidad de concretarse y manifestarse, pueden mandar a paseo toda simplicidad mediante la sencilla resolución de aferrarse a su oportunidad. La pequeña circunstancia de la pobre Nanda, y la de su madre, y la del señor Longdon y Vanderbank y Mitchy, por no hablar de la de los demás, no tienen sino que recibir una luz despedida desde el lado opuesto del Canal de la Mancha para duplicar de inmediato sus conjuros sobre la imaginación. (Estoy considerando todas estas cuestiones, apenas necesito decirlo, exclusivamente en tanto en cuanto conciernen a esa facultad. El novelista no tiene absolutamente nada que hacer con una relación con su material que *no* sea imaginativa).

Además se produjo nada menos que el hecho de que mi propio material aquí presente iba a beneficiarse de un modo inhabitual gracias a esta expansión de la perspectiva. Mi proyecto debía ser tratado con ironía ligera (sería ligero e irónico o no sería nada); así que me pregunté, como es lógico, cuál era la forma menos solemne que podía dársele de entre las formas consagradas y reconocidas. Y en un abrir y cerrar de ojos el asunto se planteó así: ¿qué forma tan reconocida, tan consagrada entre los lectores despiertos, como aquella en que embute la mayoría de sus análisis sociales la ingeniosa e inagotable, la encantadora y filosófica «Gyp»[2]? Desde hace mucho tiempo Gyp me parece la maestra, en su levedad, de una de las formas más felices… la única objeción a mi uso de la cual, procedía de una cierta insólita ceguera por parte del lector anglosajón. Servidor había catalogado a dicho lector como obcecado e incoherente en lo relativo a la deglución de «diálogo»: servidor había observado al «consumidor de ficciones» consumir diálogo, en ciertas

ocasiones, a la misma escala y con la misma fruición propias de la consumición de pan con mermelada durante una infantil fiesta escolar, consumirlo aun en el teatro, en la medida en que nuestro teatro se digna dispensarlo, y al mismo tiempo rechazarlo de modo parejamente flagrante cuando el diálogo se le sirve, por así decirlo, *au naturel*. Uno había visto buenas y sólidas rebanadas de ficción, bien untadas —según uno había podido apreciar sin duda ninguna— con esta la más suave de las lubrificaciones, deploradas por los editores a causa de no haber sido, desde el punto de vista de las tragaderas populares tal como las conciben *ellos*, preparadas de una manera lo suficientemente «melosa». «¡"Diálogo", siempre "diálogo"! —me había parecido desde largo tiempo atrás oírlos exclamar con harta frecuencia—. Nunca llegaremos a tener demasiado de él, nunca llegaremos a tener bastante de él; y ningún exceso de él, personificado en no importa qué insípida dilución o qué desmembrada dispersión, jamás ha principiado siquiera a perjudicar comercialmente a un libro tantísimo como aun la más mínima tentativa de lograr una forma y una sustancia literarias». Esta clarividencia siempre había estado presente en los oídos propios; pero al mismo tiempo había estado igualmente presente ante los ojos propios el hecho de que entre nosotros el diálogo realmente expresivo, un diálogo orgánico y dramático, que hable por sí solo, que encame y abarque la sustancia y la forma literarias, se considera una cosa espantable y aborrecible, a la cual no hay que acercarse en modo alguno. Una comedia o una tragedia pueden permanecer en cartel un millar de noches sin incitar a siquiera veinte londinenses o neoyorquinos a anhelar esa lectura de su texto impreso que en París es tan anhelada, no bien una obra teatral comienza a destacar mínimamente, que el número de ejemplares editados del texto termina sobrepasando considerablemente el número de representaciones sobre el escenario. Pero así como nuestro público, por muy entusiasmado que esté por el teatro, rehúsa cualquier tipo de relación con el texto impreso —aun cuando esto, a menos que recurramos a la hipótesis del cinismo, sólo puede deberse a la endeblez que, si se la imprimiera, la obra teatral mostraría—, parejo horror parece suscitarse ante cualquier aproximación tipográfica al repudiado texto impreso de una obra teatral o ante cualquier solapado alegato en favor de dicha aproximación. Lo más chocante estriba en el carácter casi exclusivamente tipográfico de la ofensa. Una Gyp inglesa o norteamericana ofendería tipográficamente, y eso equivaldría a su fin. *Ahí* se ensombrecía la advertencia, al igual que resplandecía el desafío, en lo relativo a la lección de esta deliciosa escritora. Yo podría emularla, ya que eso era lo que osadamente pretendía, mas el vilipendio me aguardaba si, proponiéndome tratar las diversas facetas de mi tema en la más absolutamente estatuida de las formas dialogadas, yo evocara la figura y afirmara la presencia de mis personajes poniendo repetidamente delante su nombre en mayúsculas en vez de poniendo repetidamente *detrás* un «—dijo él» o «—dijo ella». Lo único que el espacio disponible me permite constatar aquí —por mucho que la graciosa circunstancia a que estoy refiriéndome parezca invitarnos a danzar en tomo a ella cogidos de la mano— es que en todo caso yo estaba debidamente advertido, que adopté mis medidas en consecuencia, y que al reexaminar el libro ha revivido para mí mágica y cautivadoramente el modo como las adopté.

Pero el hecho de que yo emulara, decidida y seriamente —¡oh cuán seriamente!—, la levedad de Gyp y, merced al mismo criterio, la del más robusto de los frutos de la escuela de Gyp, Monsieur Henri Lavedan[3], es un aspecto del historial de *La edad ingrata* para consignar el cual he necesitado obviamente hacer acopio de coraje. Para mí es bastante vivida la expresión facial de cualquiera de aun los más amables críticos, inclusive, movido a declarar que jamás en la vida se le habría ocurrido sospecharlo. Permítaseme decir sin demora, a fin de mitigar la excesivamente respetuosa distancia a que de esta guisa debo de haber parecido seguir a mi modelo, que mi primer cuidado *tenía* que ser borrar mis huellas… por miedo a ser verdaderamente pillado *in fraganti* concibiendo o disponiendo el diálogo de modo que «hablara por sí solo». Lo que ahora veo que debió de suceder es que lo dispuse y concebí demasiado bien: demasiado bien, quiero decir, como para que se transparentase ningún rastro del estigma de Gyp, por apagado o débil que fuese. El problema parece haber sido que si por un lado logré exorcizar esa perniciosa identificación, por otro no logré suscitar en nadie la impresión de ninguna otra identificación en absoluto ni de haber adoptado ninguna concebible o conjeturable forma literaria. Mi inspiración privada había estado en la estructura narrativa de Gyp (habilidosamente disimulada, con todo mi corazón, y aplicada con la más sibilina de las constancias, mas pese a ello fielmente seguida en secreto); y sin embargo, llegado el momento, discerní que el libro no había logrado producir en ninguna persona la sensación de *ninguna* estructura narrativa. Jamás me ha salido al paso ningún atisbo de esa clase de victoria, ni de cualquier clase de apreciación crítica en relación con este aspecto; a despecho de lo cual, cuando hablo, como hace un instante, de lo que iba a «pasar» bajo la égida de mi ingeniosa estrategia, francamente me pierdo en la visión de un centenar de brillantes acaecimientos. He de convidarme a mencionar algunas de estas incidencias, pues se cuentan entre las más hermosas que jamás tendré ocasión de detallar. Pero primero he de dar la medida del grado hasta el cual fueron pura cuestión de planificación. Originariamente esta composición había aparecido en *Harper's*

Weekly durante el otoño de 1898 y las primeras semanas del invierno, y el volumen que la recopiló apareció en primavera. Mientras tanto yo había estado fuera de Inglaterra, y no fue hasta mi regreso, algún tiempo más tarde, cuando recibí de mi editor las primeras noticias sobre nuestra arriesgada aventura. Mas entonces tales noticias satisficieron de golpe toda mi curiosidad: «Siento tener que decir que el libro no ha funcionado nada bien; en toda mi carrera no había visto ninguno que fuese acogido con tan absoluta y general falta de respeto». De esta guisa no iba a quedarme nada sobre lo que hacer subsiguientemente cálidas referencias —de lo cual seguramente doy incluso ahora ilustrativo testimonio— excepto la generosa recompensa consistente en el singular interés hallado en las mayores honduras de mi esfuerzo creador.

Recuerdo toda la «faena» como maravillosamente entretenida y deliciosamente dificultosa desde los comienzos… pues siempre aguarda un genuino entretenimiento, creo, en cualquier empresa artística cuyo fundamento y trabajo preliminar sean poseedores de una especial firmeza. Sobre este duro y exquisito basamento el proceso de ejecución es consciente de la posibilidad de *brincar* más o menos alegremente; en cuyo caso las dudas desconcertantes, los obstáculos pertinaces, los peligros de detalle, pueden presentársele a docenas al escritor sin quebrarle el ánimo o desquiciarle los nervios. Lo que quiebra el ánimo son las dificultades producidas por unos cimientos endebles o una estructura insuficiente… cuando una desdichada fatuidad ha persuadido indebidamente a un autor sobre las cualidades «redentoras» de la ejecución literaria. El ser «ejecutada» no es nunca, en una idea trabajable, un simple proceso pasivo, y afirmo que no existe ningún proyecto mínimamente capaz de recibir ayuda que no sea, al igual que el hombre apurado de nuestro dicho popular, capaz de ayudarse a sí mismo lo primero de todo. De esta guisa, aquí yo iba a gozar de un envidioso atisbo, al llevar a cabo mi tarea, de ese frenesí creador y de esa serenidad creadora que siempre se me han antojado los más elevados e intensos: la confianza del dramaturgo que se siente fuerte en la posesión de sus premisas. A buen seguro el dramaturgo ha de construir, está abocado a la arquitectura, a la edificación a cualquier precio: a insertar hondamente sus puntales y a tender y fijar firmemente sus vigas y eslabones… a riesgo de no importa qué estruendos de su martillo pilón. Esto vuelve enorme el valor activo de su basamento, habilitando al dramaturgo, con los flancos protegidos, para avanzar sin dilaciones, aunque no enteramente sin precauciones, hacia esa comparativa Jauja que es una simple ansiedad leve. Dicho de otro modo: su estructura *aguanta*, y cuando el dramaturgo comprueba esto pese a percibidas tensiones y tras repetidas pruebas, resplandece de alegría. Yo me regocijé, merced a ese mismo criterio, al comprobar que *mi* estructura aguantaba; e incluso un poco pesarosamente la vi darme mucho más de lo que me había aventurado a prever. Y eso porque prontamente observé que mi prevista disposición de mi material abría la puerta de par en par a un gran despliegue de ingenio. Me acuerdo de que, al esbozar mi proyecto ante los mandamases de la publicación que ya he citado, dibujé en un papel —y posiblemente con un efecto esotérico, tal como ahora me doy cuenta, que debieron de atenuar sólo vagamente mis solícitas aclaraciones— la nítida figura de un corro consistente en una serie de redondelitos equidistantes de un objeto central. El objeto central era mi anécdota, mi tema esencial, que daría título a la obra, y los redondelitos representaban diversas lámparas, como me agradaba llamarlas, la función de cada una de las cuales sería alumbrar con toda la debida intensidad uno de los aspectos parciales del tema. Yo había dividido la anécdota, ¿es que no se daban cuenta?, en visiones parciales —por formidable que pudiera sonar esta expresioncita (aunque ni por un instante sugerí que la utilizáramos en público)—, y bajo ese signo venceríamos.

Los mandamases sí «se dieron cuenta», con total afabilidad y generosidad… pues debo agregar que yo no había tenido, que recuerde, ningún morboso escrúpulo en no parlar sobre Gyp y su extraño instigamiento. Aún más porfiadamente refrené mi lengua a este respecto considerando que cuanto más me entregaba yo, en mi imaginación, a mi proyecto y lo recorría de punta a cabo, más me henchía de satisfacción. Claramente se trataba de laborar por el mero encanto de la cosa y, durante este proceso —aspirando a cada paso a una exquisita consecución—, «embrujar, sobrecoger y cautivar». Cada una de mis «lámparas» sería la luz de una única «ocasión social» dentro de la historia e interrelación de los personajes involucrados, y extraería plenamente el latente colorido de la escena en cuestión y la obligaría a patentizar, hasta la última gota, su relevancia dentro de mi proyecto. Me entusiasmé con esta concepción de la Ocasión como una cosa autosuficiente, una cosa total y absolutamente dramatúrgica, y yo apenas podía, guarecido entre los densos arcanos de mi plan, aludirla con una O lo bastante mayúscula. Lo singular de mi concepción radicaba en esta aproximación de las respectivas divisiones de mi estructura a los sucesivos Actos de una Comedia… en lo cual había más pretexto que nunca para el uso de deleitadas mayúsculas. La divina distinción de los actos de una comedia —una distinción más magnifícente que cualquier otra que fácilmente puedan alcanzar— estribaba, razoné, en su especial, su riguroso enfoque externo. Este enfoque externo, a su vez, cuando logra su ideal, proviene de la obligada imposibilidad de «explorar las trastiendas», de introducir explicaciones

introspectivas y matizaciones subjetivas, de rebuscar entre la utilería de la gran tienda de accesorios ilusionísticos frecuentada por todo «mero» novelista: recurso éste cuya eliminación resultó parejamente desconcertante y estimulante, para variar, a la hora de proceder. Todo, si a eso vamos, se vuelve fascinante desde el momento en que, para alcanzar una decidida plenitud de efecto, debe atenerse fielmente a un estilo adoptado. Los «estilos» son el mismísimo aliento de la literatura, y la belleza y la fuerza surgen de un completo sometimiento a ellos, de ahondar hasta el límite en sus respectivas direcciones e imbuirse profundamente de sus planteamientos. Yo mismo apenas necesito alegar en pro del método de «explorar las trastiendas», que es apropiado y hermoso y fecundo en su momento y lugar; pero, dado que la informe mezcolanza de estilos es la inelegancia de las letras y la degradación de los valores, el renunciar enteramente a ese método y hacer en su lugar algo por completo diferente puede resultar en otros casos el rumbo certero y la senda del triunfo. Además, algo en la mismísima naturaleza, en el exquisito rigor, de este peculiar sacrificio (que al amante de la forma literaria puede parecerle, barrunto, una forma mucho más estructurada que ninguna otra) le presta un hechizo coercitivo: un hechizo que aumenta en la medida en que nuestro recurrir a él lo refuerza y lo amplifica y lo tensa, lo pone a prueba enérgicamente. Hacer que cada ocasión presentada hable por sí sola, permanezca confinada en su propia presentación y sin embargo, dentro de esa parcela cercada, resulte absolutamente interesante y quede absolutamente clara, no es un procedimiento meritorio, sin duda, cuando se carga sobre él un peso muy ligero, pero sí es lo bastante complicado como para exigir y estimular una infinita destreza tan pronto como los ingredientes que hay que manejar principian mínimamente a «cobrar magnitud».

Quienes desdeñan el teatro contemporáneo niegan, obviamente, con toda celeridad, que los temas que hayan de ser expresados por este medio —plena y convincentemente expresados, quieren decir— *puedan* tener ninguna magnitud; puesto que desde el momento en que la tengan se infringe una de las reglas. Sencillamente el procedimiento se desmorona bajo cualquier presión, según arguyen: demuestra su debilidad tan pronto como deja de ser simple la función que se le encomienda. «Recuerda —le dicen al dramaturgo— que debes ser, ante todo, tres cosas: debes ser fiel a tu forma, debes ser profundo, debes ser claro. En otras palabras, debes demostrar estar capacitado para cargar con un peso oneroso. Y sin embargo te desafiamos a que cumplas realmente estas reglas con cualquier peso que no sea ligero. Haz que el drama que te propones escribir, haz que el cuadro que te propones pintar, sea mínimamente rico y complejo, y cesarás de ser claro. Permanece claro (con esa claridad exigida por la pueril inteligencia de cualquier público que consiente en ir al teatro) y ¿qué queda de la "importancia" de tu tema? Si éste es importante según cualquier rasero crítico distinto de la pequeña cinta métrica de treinta centímetros a la cual debe plegarse toda obra "en cartel", está predestinado a convertirse en un galimatías. Y, cuando se salve de ser un galimatías, la impresión que en el mejor de los casos habrá logrado producir será identificada como una de esas que reciben la calificación de elevadas sólo merced a la benevolencia, merced al provincianismo intelectual, de la crítica teatral, la cual, según vemos cotidianamente con nuestros propios ojos, es… vaya, un abismo aún más insondable que el propio teatro. No pretendas apabullamos con Dumas[4] e Ibsen, pues tales lumbreras, desde cualquier punto de vista informado y esclarecido, o sea el propio de otras muy distintas lumbreras (literarias, críticas, filosóficas), son de una categoría muy mediana. Precisamente Ibsen y Dumas son casos de hombres (hombres especulativos hasta donde ello es posible estando constreñidos dentro de la miseria de su dramatúrgica camisa de fuerza) que han debido renunciar a lo más refinado en aras de lo más vulgar: a lo denso, por decirlo de una vez, en aras de lo trivial y a lo personal en aras de lo tópico. ¿Qué distinción intelectual, qué "prestigio" de calidad, le habrían sido imputados a la sustancia de obras tales como *Denise*, como *Monsieur Alphonse*, como *Francillon* (y nos ceñimos al Dumas de la etapa supuestamente más primorosa), plasmada en otra forma literaria? ¿Qué virtudes de ese mismo rango les habrían sido atribuidas a *Los pilares de la sociedad*, a *Un enemigo del pueblo*, a *Espectros*, a *Rosmersholm*, o (asimismo ciñéndonos a la "etapa más primorosa" de Ibsen) a *Juan Gabriel Borkmann*, a *Solness, el constructor*? De hecho Ibsen resulta un ejemplo oportunísimo, pues desde el momento en que Ibsen es claro, desde el momento en que es "entretenido", es sobre la base de una tesis tan simple y superficial como la de Casa de muñecas… y desde el momento en que abriga la aparente intención de ser profundo e incisivo, es sobre la base de un efecto tan confuso y oscuro como el de *El pato silvestre*. De donde se deduce muy bien que es imposible cumplir realmente *todas* las reglas. El dramaturgo ha de decidir cuáles de ellas le importan más, y por su elección se lo conoce».

Así concluye el objetante, y desde luego nunca sin una gran satisfacción por haber «desembuchado». De todas formas su aparente victoria —si es que llega a ser siquiera aparente— deja, se advertirá, suficientes posibilidades a un contraataque desde la acribillada fachada del baluarte enemigo. En estos casos la última palabra no puede tenerla sino quien aspire a una relativización absoluta. Los argumentos aquí esgrimidos,

evidentemente, son cuestión de apreciación personal, y por lo mismo se podría igualmente aducir (afortunadamente para nosotros comoquiera que se mire) tanto que *Monsieur Alphonse* se desarrolla con el más alto grado de incisividad como que Espectros simplifica hasta límites intolerables. Aunque *Juan Gabriel Borkmann* no valiera un pimiento como retrato de un personaje que podríamos imaginar mucho más matizadamente presentado y aunque la fascinación de *Hedda Gabler* estuviera debilitada por un considerable hermetismo, en virtud de la misma naturaleza del asunto no hay posibilidad de pillar en un error al convencido, o llamémoslo embaucado, espectador o lector. Como mucho, el espectador o lector puede ser pillado en el acto de prestar atención, la más intensa atención, y eso es todo lo que, cuando menos como inapreciable prolegómeno, le pide el comediógrafo, amén de ser lo máximo que puede obtener aun el más divino de los poetas. Recuerdo que al advertir esto, tras haberme puesto manos a la obra con *La edad ingrata*, me regocijé tantísimo como si en realidad estuviera construyendo una pieza teatral… al igual que sin duda puedo parecer ahora no menos ansioso de tener bien presente la filosofía del rumbo del dramaturgo que si yo perteneciera a su mismo gremio. Yo sentí, desde luego, la confianza que el dramaturgo siente, participé de sus entretenimientos técnicos, apuré hasta las heces la agridulzura de su cáliz: lo maravilloso y lo intrincado (por insistir otra vez sobre ello) de rehuir lo pobre *aunque* los ingredientes que uno maneja sólo puedan, si se persigue la intensidad, entablar relaciones entre sí, relaciones con ingredientes que pertenezcan exactamente al mismo plano de mostración. En un «relato» la mostración puede significar una veintena de direcciones distintas, una cincuentena de desviaciones, digresiones, excrecencias, y la novela, tal como se practica mayoritariamente en los países anglohablantes, es el verdadero paraíso de los cabos sueltos. Pero una pieza teatral sólo tolera una lógica unidireccional, matemáticamente exacta, y un cabo suelto resulta una impertinencia tan grosera, y un deshonor tan denigrante, como una hilacha suelta de seda o lana en el anverso de un tapiz. Aquí estamos abocados sin remedio a una red de relaciones minuciosamente trenzadas, relaciones recíprocas e inherentes a la historia: ninguna parte de la acción puede estar relacionada salvo con otra parte de la acción… exceptuando naturalmente la relación de la totalidad de la acción con la vida. Y, tras haber invocado el amparo de Gyp, me di cuenta de que el quid de mi estrategia estaba todo en el problema de mantener cristalinas estas restrictas relaciones al mismo tiempo que consentía, en imitación a la vida, que fueran variadas y retorcidas y características del mundo londinense (ya que el mundo londinense era casi inextricable en tales y cuales sentidos). Todo lo cual iba a acrecentar mis complicaciones a la hora de los hechos.

Naturalmente ahora me percato de hasta qué punto, debido a dichas complicaciones, me alejé del espíritu de Gyp; pero en este momento me percato de tantas otras cosas más, que este concreto distanciamiento de la simplicidad apenas cuenta comparado con los otros… una vez cumplida su misión, esto es, de ilustrar mi primigenio candor emulativo. Pues lo que en particular percibo —con una reanimadora vibración de ese interés en el cual, como digo, a mi parecer está embalsamado el plan del libro — es que probablemente mi proyecto estaba condenado de antemano a un notable, o quizá más exactamente a un casi absurdamente agradecido[5], sobretratamiento. Para mí, así, se encuadra en un grupo de produccioncillas que hacen alarde de esta perversidad, plasmaciones de ideadas anécdotas donde por lo visto mi método consistió en drenar concienzudamente no sólo las humedades superfluas, sino también (ya que con esta acusación me he topado) absolutamente todo el aire respirable. En definitiva, puedo reseñar que, habiendo retomado a estas páginas con el poderoso presentimiento de que iban a dar cumplida fe, para bochorno mío, de dicho desastre, inclusive hasta el extremo de inhabilitarlas para un decente relanzamiento, me he encontrado con que la aventura ha tomado, para alivio mío, un rumbo muy distinto y me he abismado en mi asombro ante aquello que puede ser logrado mediante un «sobretratamiento», mediante la exhaustividad de su temeraria inventiva. Por consiguiente el resucitado interés de que hablo ha sido el de perseguir críticamente, página tras página, igual que el piel roja rastrea por el bosque las pisadas del rostro pálido, las huellas de la sistemática coherencia que fui capaz de lograr. Lo agradable de esta *constatación* está, como ya he insinuado, en la pormenorizada exhaustividad del proceso, y los pormenores son tan tupidos, la textura del delineado y alisado tapiz es tan compacta, que el genio de la propia Gyp, nada fascinado por los férreos rigores, habría sido sin duda, una vez alertado, el primero en desaprobar mi homenaje. Pero lo que entretanto ha ocurrido es que dicha intensa coherencia ha logrado en sí misma, por así decirlo, constituirse en un espectáculo y como consecuencia de ello me parece que ha resultado iluminada una importantísima verdad artística. Ya rozamos tal verdad hace un momento cuando hablamos de la renuncia a las amplificaciones introspectivas en cualquier proyecto que pudiera comprimirse dentro del molde de una «pieza teatral» sin agrietarlo ni reventarlo; y al mismo tiempo no olvidamos que la pintura de la situación de Nanda Brookenham, aunque a un ojo poco perspicaz acaso pueda parecerle errática y deshilvanada, sin embargo está compuesta siguiendo criterios absolutamente dramatúrgicos, ni que cada

una de sus escenas por sí sola, así como cada una en relación con todas y cada una de sus compañeras, se atiene sin el menor desfallecimiento a los principios rectores de una pieza teatral.

Siendo así el caso, ello consigue algo más: con la mayor felicidad del mundo nos ayuda a ver ejemplarmente pulverizada la académica distinción entre contenido y forma dentro de una obra de arte auténticamente trabajada. Sostengo que es imposible decir, ante *La edad ingrata*, dónde termina uno de estos elementos y dónde comienza el otro: al menos yo mismo he sido incapaz, durante el reexamen, de localizar ninguna juntura o sutura semejante, de percibir como separadas estas dos *cumplidas* funciones. Están separadas antes de empezar, pero el sacramento de la realización las casa indisolublemente, y este matrimonio, como cualquier otro matrimonio, no tiene sino que ser «verdadero» para que no asome el escándalo de una brecha. Artísticamente, la obra «elaborada» es una fusión o, si no, es que no ha *sido* elaborada… en cuyo caso desde luego el artista puede ser, y muy merecidamente, lapidado con cualesquiera de sus fragmentos despegados que al crítico se le antoje recoger del suelo. Pero si realmente ha logrado su hazaña, en este peculiar campo de batalla, el artista no sabe nada de fragmentos desprendidos y puede decir con la mayor ufanidad: «Despega uno solo si puedes. Tú puedes analizar, según *tu* método, eso sí, para informar, para comentar, para explicar; pero no puedes desintegrar mi síntesis; no puedes disolver los elementos de mi todo en diferentes componentes activos o siquiera encontrar la pista (para lograr tu propio cruel propósito). Mi amalgama no tiene sino que ser perfecta para dejarte literalmente confundido: estás perdido en la espesura del bosque. Demuéstrame que este valor, este efecto, a la vista del resultado final, pertenece a mi tema y que aquel valor, aquel efecto, pertenece a mi tratamiento, demuéstrame que no los he agitado y mezclado tal como *debe* hacerlo consumadamente el mago que afirmo ser, y me comprometo a no volver a actuar más que en barracas de feria». La memorable compacidad de *La edad ingrata* ha llegado a aparecérseme, durante la relectura, lo confieso, como si se tratara de riquezas instintiva y previsoramente acumuladas en el cielo contra mi presente oportunidad de realizar estas mismísimas disquisiciones. Me he quedado realmente anonadado ante la multiplicidad de significados y complejidad de propósitos, la magnitud de las *fuentes de interés*, como se me ocurre denominarlas, que logré infundir dramatúrgicamente, y sin detrimento de la intensidad, la nitidez y la «atmósfera», en cada una de mis alumbradoras Ocasiones… en las cuales, al llegar a ciertas encrucijadas, la debida preservación de todos estos valores exigió, dicho sea en palabras vulgares, un buen montón de latoso trabajo.

Precisamente aquí me habría gustado reexaminar con el lector algunos de los pasajes más esmeradamente habilidosos que puedo recordar: por ejemplo, el episodio del hermoso y, por así decirlo, sobrehumano intento del señor Longdon por llegar a un pacto con Vanderbank, ya entrada la noche, en la sala de billar de la mansión campestre donde se hallan de visita; por ejemplo, el otro episodio nocturno, bajo el techo del señor Longdon, entre Vanderbank y Mitchy, donde la plasmación de muchísimas implicaciones tortuosas, muchísimos fulgores de la antorcha espiritual, es efectuada de un modo satisfactorio y seguro a través del laberinto de meras apariencias externas, meras obviedades conversacionales; por ejemplo, toda la batería de recursos de presentación empleados, sistemáticamente pero sin un solo ripio, para la cabal caracterización de un Mitchy «sutil» no menos que sólido y sólido no menos que intocado por esa serie de oficiosos análisis psicológicos que denominamos «explorar la trastienda»; por ejemplo, en suma, el servicio global de coordinación y vivificación prestado, siguiendo unas pautas de feroz, de casi verdaderamente heroica condensación, por la pintura del grupo congregado en casa de la señora Grendon, donde las «referencias recíprocas» de la acción son tan espesas como la frondosidad de los árboles de un parque y sin embargo están —tal como deben estarlo dramatúrgicamente— calculadas y dispuestas, sopesadas de un modo responsable. Si a este respecto me propusiera utilizar una palabra «altisonante» —y en general el valorador detesta las palabras altisonantes al igual que una persona de buen gusto detesta los colores chillones—, yo calificaría como victoriosamente científica la composición del grupo de capítulos intitulado «Tishy Grendon», con todas las piezas del juego juntas sobre el tablero y cada una colocada en una posición precisa y estratégica. He de amonestarme debidamente, en vez de eso, que en realidad la más provechosa lección extraída de mi ojeada retrospectiva podría ser una profunda revisión del problema de lo que puede implicar para un proyecto el sufrir —si de sufrimiento puede hablarse— un sobretratamiento. Agobiada durante tanto tiempo por la sensación de que en este caso el resultado del sobretratamiento había sido un completo fiasco, mi conciencia artística experimenta el alivio de comprobar sin lugar a dudas que aquí no hay trazas de sufrimiento ninguno. A mi complacido y algo más maduro entender, la obra se sostiene con todos los síntomas de la solidez, una insolencia de salud y felicidad. Y de aquí precisamente extraigo mi moraleja; la cual consiste en que, dado que nuestro único modo, en términos generales, de saber que tenemos un exceso de lo que fuere es *sintiendo* ese exceso, entonces, por regla de tres, cuando no sentimos el susodicho exceso (y yo estoy aseverando, fíjense, que en *La edad ingrata* la

exuberancia está sujeta al orden), ¿cómo saber que la medida no especificada, la marca no rebasada, implica adecuación o suficiencia? Una mera sensación puede servimos de guía ante ciertos grados de congestión, pero para una ciencia exacta, es decir para la crítica de «una bella arte», necesitamos una notación precisa. Una notación precisa, empero, es aquello de lo cual carecemos, y el veredicto de una mera sensación es proclive a fluctuaciones. En otras palabras la imputación de un defecto no es nunca, aun en el peor de los casos, una verdad absoluta, ni otra cosa que una cuestión de apreciación personal… por retomar a mi vindicación de que la ventura de la situación del dramaturgo consiste en que su «todo» sintético es su estilo literario, lo único que nos concierne. Deseo beneficiarme, en compañía del dramaturgo, del hecho de que aunque por supuesto nuestro arte debe, en cuanto a la impresión que produce, someterse a los altibajos —dentro de la fiebre crítica— del mercurio acusador, de todas formas no tiene que soportar la existencia de ningún termómetro inapelable e inamovible.

HENRY JAMES

Libro Primero

LADY JULIA

I

Excepto cuando daba la casualidad de que llovía Vanderbank siempre regresaba a casa caminando, pero normalmente tomaba un cabriolé cuando la lluvia era moderada y adoptaba la predilección de todo filósofo cuando la lluvia era recia. Por consiguiente, en esta ocasión advirtió, al abrirle la puerta el criado, cierta congruencia entre el clima y aquel «cuatro ruedas» que, en la vacía calle, bajo el acristalado resplandor, aguardaba y chorreaba y oscuramente relucía[6]. El mayordomo lo describió como lo único que, en noche tan desapacible, habían podido procurarle, y Vanderbank, tras contestar que era precisamente lo que mejor le venía, se dispuso, desde el umbral, a abrir su paraguas y precipitarse hacia el carruaje. En este instante oyó su apellido pronunciado por alguien detrás suyo y, al darse la vuelta, se vio frente a un compañero de reunión entrado en años con quien había estado charlando tras la cena y sobre el cual, un poco más tarde, en el piso superior, había sondeado a la anfitriona. Ahora se presentaba claramente el problema de lograr que volviera a casa este amigable, este aparentemente blando sujeto: la posibilidad de que no se presentara ese otro carruaje en acecho del cual uno de los lacayos, con un silbido en los labios, aún seguía estirando el cuello y escuchando a través del aguacero. El señor Longdon se preguntó, ante Vanderbank, si por un acaso sus itinerarios no serían semejantes; lo cual indujo a nuestro joven amigo a expresar inmediatamente su disposición a conducirlo sano y salvo en cualquier dirección que le conviniera. Visto que el silbido del lacayo se perdía en vano, ambos montaron en el cuatro ruedas, donde, al cabo de unos instantes, Vanderbank cobró conciencia de haber propuesto su propio domicilio como final de trayecto. ¿Acaso eso no sería una más idónea culminación de la velada que separarse lisa y llanamente mientras caían chuzos de punta? Le había agradado su nuevo conocido, quien le dio la impresión de hasta cierto punto haberse colocado bajo su amparo, quien se alojaba en un hotel que a aquellas horas presumiblemente resultaría inhóspito y quien, confesando con abierta humildad una relación decididamente tímida con un club donde no estaba permitido traer visitas, aceptó, ante las insistencias, aquella invitación. Cuando llegaron, Vanderbank se sintió divertido ante el aire de sobreañadida extravagancia con que su nuevo conocido ordenó que el carruaje se quedara allí aguardándolo: resultó bien patente que hasta ese grado disfrutaba de la perspectiva de convertir todo aquello en una ocasión memorable.

—Ustedes los jóvenes, creo, hacen aguardar los carruajes durante horas, ¿verdad? ¡Por lo menos eso hacían en mis tiempos —dijo riendo el anciano— los jóvenes impetuosos! Pero es que me parece que todos eran impetuosos entonces. Seguramente cuando uno se instala en la capital termina por aprender cómo manejarse; sólo que me temo, ¿sabe?, que me hallo completamente desintonizado. En verdad me siento bastante enmohecido. ¡Son ya treinta años…!

—¿Desde que estuvo usted en Londres por última vez?

—Sí, para pasar más de unos pocos días seguidos, palabra de honor. Usted no lo entenderá: no más, seguramente, de lo que yo mismo entiendo cómo, al fin y a la postre, he aceptado esta paradójica perspectiva de regresar para siempre. Mas no me cabe duda de que acabaré solicitándole, si tiene usted la amabilidad de permitírmelo, la ayuda de una orientación o dos: sobre cómo manejarse, ¿comprende?, y no (¿cómo se lo llama a eso?) *ser* manejado. ¡Ahora bien, en lo tocante a *estos* cachivaches…!

El cachivache en cuestión era el ascensor en el cual, remolonamente y con muchas estridencias y chirridos, el portero transportó a los dos caballeros hasta la vertiginosa cúspide, tal como fue calificada aquella elevación por el señor Longdon, donde Vanderbank tenía su nido. La impresión que a aquél le produjo el mentado artilugio lo hizo aparecer como una persona sencillota, y sin embargo cuando su compañero, una vez llegados, haciéndolo pasar, pulsó el instantáneo interruptor y, en la confortable habitación rubicunda, toda comodidad y temperamento, le dedicó una nueva mirada junto a la chimenea, no le apreció ningún rasgo abultado. El señor Longdon era liviano y pulcro, de complexión frágil y de rostro a la vez enjuto y cordial, con cejas negras exquisitamente delimitadas y un dócil cabello espeso donde lo

plateado se entreveraba de oscuras sombras. No llevaba barba ni bigote y en el parpadeo de sus despiertos ojos castaños y la decidida calidez de su sonrisa semejaba portar más que suficientes elementos para compensar lo que en él pudiera ser, despistada u obtusamente, echado en falta en cualquier otro respecto: lo cual podía denominarse envergadura, sustancia, presencia… algo que vulgarmente se llama importancia. De hecho el señor Longdon no tenía presencia, pero extrañamente sí tenía efecto. Casi habría podido ser un sacerdote, si los sacerdotes, como se le ocurrió a Vanderbank, pudieran ser tales dandis. En lodo caso ya había doblado conclusivamente el Cabo de los Años: nunca más volvería a tener cincuenta y cinco; a la avisadora luz de este árido promontorio ya le había vuelto una sufcientemente sabedora espalda. No obstante, aun cuando, al modo de ver de Vanderbank, no le era dado parecer joven, se aproximaba bastante —extraña y graciosamente— a parecer nuevo; por cierto que esto, tras unos instantes, acaso proviniera principalmente de la perfección de su traje de etiqueta y la especial elegancia del gabán sin mangas que evidentemente el señor Longdon había adquirido para complementarlo y que incluso quizá se había puesto hoy por vez primera. En casa de la señora Brookenham había estado hablándole a Vanderbank sobre Beccles y Suffolk; mas no había sido en Beccles, ni en ninguna otra parte del condado de Suffolk, donde habían sido confeccionadas estas galas. Su resultado personal ya había sido, por muy inintencionadamente que lítese, presentar bajo una luz favorable esta región ante su interlocutor. A ese respecto, Vanderbank poseía la clase de imaginación que gusta de ubicar a los objetos, aun hasta el punto de olvidarse de ellos para concentrarse en sus condiciones circundantes: ya estaba imaginándose cuán acogedora y apacible localidad debía ser la que había conservado a un hombre con la inteligencia tan despejada al mismo tiempo que le había permitido mantenerse tan apuesto. De cualquier manera este producto de Beccles aceptó un cigarrillo —asimismo como una broma y una travesura— y escudriñó su derredor como si se sintiese aún más encantado de lo que se había esperado. Enseguida prorrumpió, a través de sus quevedos, en una exclamación que fue como una fugaz punzada de envidia y pesadumbre:

—¡Ustedes los jóvenes, ustedes los jóvenes!…

—Pues ¿qué nos pasa a los jóvenes? —El tono de Vanderbank estuvo en consonancia con la gentileza de la alusión—. No soy tan joven, aparte, como usted da a entender.

—¿Cuántos años tiene, si no le importa?

—Caramba, tengo treinta y cuatro.

—Y ¿cómo llamaría usted a eso? ¡Yo tengo ciento tres! —El señor Longdon sacó su reloj—. Son sólo las once y cuarto. —Después inquirió con un rápido desplazamiento del interés—: ¿Cuál dijo usted que era su cargo público?

—Trabajo en el Tribunal de Cuentas. Soy presidente delegado.

—¡Caracoles! —El señor Longdon lo miró como si fuera un edificio de cincuenta ventanas—. ¡Menuda cabeza debe usted tener!

—Ya lo creo: nuestra cabeza[7] es Sir Digby Dence.

—Y ¿qué trabajo le damos los ciudadanos a usted?

—Vaya, ustedes me doran la píldora… aunque tal vez no muy densamente. Pero se trata de un puesto decente.

—¿Algo por lo cual muchísimas personas se dejarían la piel a tiras? —Tanto semejaba el anciano haber quedado insatisfecho con una descripción tan vaga, que su compañero dejó de lado todo escrúpulo:

—Soy el hombre más envidiado que conozco… de tal modo que si fuera una pizca menos amigable sería uno de los más odiados.

El señor Longdon se rió, aunque no del todo como si estuviesen bromeando:

—Entiendo. Sus agradables modales lo hacen salir airoso del trance.

Vanderbank no se mostró, empero, serio:

—¿Es que acaso no me harían salir airoso de cualquier trance?

Otra vez su visitante, a través del *pince-nez*, pareció coronarlo con una comisa como las de Whitehall, y dijo:

—Creo que es mi deber decirle que estoy estudiándolo a usted. Informarlo de ello no es sino jugar limpio —siguió, con una seriedad no desconcertada por la indulgencia del semblante de Vanderbank—. ¡Pero eso no debe serle motivo de preocupación! —agregó para restablecer la confianza, habiéndose parado entretanto ante una fotografía colgada de la pared—. ¡Ésta es la madre de usted! —exclamó con algo del regocijo de un niño que hace un descubrimiento o descifra un acertijo—. Todavía no logro relacionar los rasgos de usted con los de ella… con los de mi recuerdo de ella, recuerdo que, como ya le dije, es imborrable; pero seguro que lo lograré pronto.

Vanderbank era cada vez más consciente de que la clase de regocijo que él le suscitaba jamás podría ser

óbice para el afecto:

—Por favor, tómese todo el tiempo que necesite.

El señor Longdon tomó a mirar su reloj:

—¿Realmente cree usted que *debo* hacerlo quedarse aguardándome?

—¿El carruaje? —A Vanderbank le había caído tan bien, hallaba en él tal promesa de cosas gratas, que se sintió casi tentado de decir: «Querido y delicioso señor, no tome en cuesta esa cuestión: ¡estoy dispuesto a pagarle yo mismo al cochero toda una noche de espera!». En todo caso su asentimiento fue pleno—: Desde luego que sí. Es la única forma de olvidarse de ese problema.

—¡Ah, ustedes los jóvenes, ustedes los jóvenes! —volvió a quejarse su invitado. Ahora estaba ante la fotografía (Vanderbank tenía muchas, demasiadas fotografías) de algún otro pariente, y limpió con un pañuelo los lentes de montura de oro a través de los cuales había estado lanzando admiraciones y recogiendo indicios de sorpresas—. ¡No diga bobadas! —continuó cuando de nuevo su amigo trató de interponer una protesta—; yo pertenezco a un periodo histórico diferente del suyo. Esta noche ha habido cosas que me han hecho sentirme como si me hubieran desenterrado… literalmente exhumado de un prolongado letargo. ¡Le aseguro que las ha habido! —insistió seriamente en su punto de vista.

Durante unos instantes Vanderbank se preguntó qué cosas concretamente podrían ser aquéllas: se halló deseando asimilar todo cuanto su visitante representaba, tomar posesión de ello e ingresar, por así decirlo, en su bando. Tanteó, con intencionalidad desvergonzadamente sarcástica, una posibilidad inmediata:

—¿La extraordinaria vitalidad de Brookenham?

De nuevo con las pinzas colocadas, el señor Longdon lo atalayó con una seriedad que no logró impedir que el otro descubriera en los ojos que había tras ellas una tenue reverberación de su ironía.

—¡Oh, Brookenham! Debe usted contármelo todo sobre Brookenham.

—Ya veo que no es a eso a lo que usted se refiere.

El señor Longdon se abstuvo de negarlo:

—Me pregunto si comprendería usted a qué me refiero. —Vanderbank se erizó de ganas de ser puesto a prueba, pero fue contenido antes de poder manifestarlo—. Y ¿cuál es su departamento, el de Brookenham?

—Oh, Ríos y Lagos: un asunto estupendo. Ingresó el año pasado.

El señor Longdon —aunque no demasiado crasamente— se maravilló:

—¿Cómo consiguió ingresar?

Vanderbank respondió riéndose:

—Digamos que *ella* lo ingresó.

Su amigo permaneció serio:

—Y en la actualidad ¿aproximadamente cuánto…?

—Oh, mil doscientas… y un buen montón de subsidios y descuentos y embarcaciones y esa clase de cosas. ¡Para realizar su trabajo! —exclamó, todavía con una cierta ligereza, Vanderbank.

—Y ¿*cuál* es ese trabajo?

El joven vaciló:

—Pregúnteselo *a él*. Se lo dirá encantado.

—Sin embargo no parecía persona que tenga mucho que decir —tornó a ponderar con exactitud el señor Longdon.

—Oh, no es así cuando se aborda ese asunto. Póngalo a prueba.

Él observó más acusadamente a su anfitrión, cual si vagamente recelara una trampa; después, no menos vagamente, suspiró:

—Bueno, precisamente para eso he venido: para ponerlos a prueba a todos ustedes. Pero ¿él y su familia viven de eso? —prosiguió.

Otra vez Vanderbank titubeó:

—No se sabe muy bien de qué viven. Pero cuentan con medios de subsistencia… pues fue precisamente esto, según recuerdo, lo que demostró que si Brookenham se hizo con el cargo no fue porque anduviera en busca de empleo. El cargo le fue concedido, quiero decir, no por sus meras necesidades domésticas, sino por su notable eficiencia. Brookenham posee una heredad (un feo lugarcejo en Gloucestershire) que a veces alquilan. Su hermano mayor tiene la mejor, pero el caso es que la suya les proporciona ciertas rentas.

Por un instante, el señor Longdon se sumió en sus pensamientos:

—Sí, ya recuerdo: uno oyó hablar de estas cosas en su época. Y *ella* debía de poseer algo.

—Sí, desde luego, ella poseía algo… y siempre poseerá su enorme inteligencia. Sabe hacer las cosas la mar de bien. Las mujeres se las arreglan de maravilla.

—De maravilla —hizo de eco el señor Longdon inteligentemente—. Pero una casa en la calle

Buckingham Crescent, habida cuenta del modo como parecen haber soñado con establecerse en tantas otras partes…

—Oh, las cosas les van bien —dejó caer Vanderbank tranquilizadoramente.

—Es reconfortante asegurarse de eso respecto de personas con quienes uno ha estado cenando. ¿Son cuatro los hijos? —continuó su amigo.

—El hijo mayor, a quien ya ha visto usted y que, a su modo, es un fenómeno; la hija mayor, a quien debe usted ver; y dos chiquillos, varón y hembra, a quienes no debe usted ver.

A estas alturas, en el creciente interés de la conversación, probablemente ya no había nada lo bastante formidable como para intimidar al señor Longdon:

—¿Quiere decir que los chiquillos son unos… descarriados?

—No: únicamente son, como todos los jovencitos actuales, en mi opinión, misterios, terribles pequeños misterios desconcertantes. —Vanderbank había vuelto a sentirse muy divertido: en el semblante de su amigo brillaba tenuemente que, por momentos alcanzando un grado de veras alarmante, sus explicaciones adensaban las tinieblas. Entonces con mayor interés volvió a las andadas—: Ya identifico la cosa que usted mencionó hace un momento, la cosa que le parece chocante. —Expuso su identificación casi con hilaridad —: La charla. —Ante esto, el señor Longdon se limitó a mirarlo, mudamente, con mayor intensidad, pero él insistió seguro de sí mismo—: Sí, la charla… pues es que charlamos, no cabe duda. —Su invitado siguió sin decir esta boca es mía, limitándose a atalayarlo, ante su insinuación, con una especie de suspensa elocuencia. Lo que fuera que el anciano se sintiera tentado de decir, no obstante, lo despachó en un sucinto murmullo; ya se había vuelto otra vez hacia la serie de retratos y, mientras contemplaba otro, Vanderbank tomó a hablar—: Me resultó muy interesante oírlo decir, cuando las damas nos dejaron a solas, cuántos viejos hilos estaba usted dispuesto a retomar.

El señor Longdon guardó silencio.

—Soy un niño viejo que recuerda a todas las madres —contestó por último.

—Sí, me contó usted lo bien que recuerda a la de la señora Brookenham.

—¡Ah, ah! —Y cambió a un nuevo asunto—: Esta debe ser Mary, la hermana de usted.

—Sí; es un retrato muy malo, pero como está muerta…

—¿Muerta? ¡Cielos, cielos!

—Oh, desde hace mucho tiempo —lo despreocupó Vanderbank—. Es delicioso por parte de usted —insistió— haber conocido también a tantos miembros de *mi* familia.

El señor Longdon lo encaró abandonando su contemplación con un visible esfuerzo:

—Le estoy muy agradecido por tomárselo así: ello habría podido (nunca se sabe) no hacerle ninguna gracia. Como ya le dije allí, lo primero que hice fue interrogar a Fernanda sobre los asistentes; y cuando ella mencionó el nombre de usted, inmediatamente dije: «¿A él le agradaría tener una conversación conmigo?».

—Y ¿qué respondió Fernanda?

El señor Longdon se quedó mirando pasmado:

—¿*Usted* la llama Fernanda?

Decididamente Vanderbank se sintió muchísimo más culpable de lo que se había esperado:

—¿Le parece un detalle excesivo teniendo en cuenta la cosa que hemos mencionado hace un momento?

Su amigo titubeó; después dijo con una sonrisa algo rara:

—Discúlpeme: *yo* no he mencionado…

—En efecto, no lo ha hecho; y su delicadeza es magnífica. A decir verdad —continuó Vanderbank— yo no llamo a la señora Brookenham por su nombre de pila.

La clara mirada del señor Longdon fue incisiva:

—¿Salvo cuando habla sobre ella con otras personas? —De veras parecía interesado por averiguarlo.

Vanderbank no se mostró sino sumamente dispuesto a satisfacerlo:

—A usted seguramente le pareceremos un grupo de gente bastante vulgar. Ésa no es, ya me hago cargo, la forma como en Beccles se alude a las damas.

—¡Ah, si se burla usted de mí! —Y el anciano se dio la vuelta.

—No me amenace —dijo Vanderbank— o *haré* que se marche el carruaje. Por supuesto comprendo a qué se refiere. Resultará enormemente interesante conocer lo que a los vírgenes oídos de usted les parece lo bajo que hemos caído (¡pues es que *hemos* caído!). Coja otro cigarrillo. Por depravado que pueda yo parecerle, a veces eso es algo que ofende a mis propios oídos. Pero no estoy tan seguro por lo que respecta a los oídos de la señora Brookenham, a quien conozco desde hace mucho tiempo.

Otra vez el señor Longdon recogió sus palabras:

—¿Qué es lo que entienden por mucho tiempo ustedes los del grupo?

Vanderbank reflexionó:

—¡Ah, ahí lo tiene: con qué tono habla de «nosotros los del grupo»! Bien hecho; fustíguenos sin piedad. Seguro que de un modo u otro nos lo hemos ganado a pulso. Pues bien, la conozco desde hace diez años. Pero rematadamente bien.

—¿Qué entienden por rematadamente bien?

—¿Nosotros los del grupo? —Habiéndose aproximado, en su continuo escudriñar inquieto, el interrogador de Vanderbank, este joven le había posado sobre el hombro una mano sumamente considerada —. ¿No hace usted tal vez demasiadas preguntas? Pero no —añadió presta y alegremente—, naturalmente que no hace usted demasiadas preguntas; si no me ando con tiento produciré, en usted, exactamente el efecto que no ansío. Me atrevería a decir que no sé *cuán* bien conozco a la señora Brookenham. Esa clase de cosas, ¿no debería ser mantenida, en cierto modo, en una estricta reserva? Lo que hace un instante quise decir es que yo jamás (al menos eso espero) la habría llamado así excepto ante un viejo amigo.

Enseguida el señor Longdon pareció satisfecho y tranquilizado:

—Probablemente usted me oyó dirigirme así a ella.

—Eso es cierto, pero usted está en su derecho, y ello no me valdría de excusa a mí. Sólo que todos los domingos acudo a visitarla.

El señor Longdon consideró; luego, un tanto para sorpresa de Vanderbank, en todo caso para su aún mayor regocijo, preguntó con franqueza:

—¿Sólo a Fernanda? ¿A ninguna otra dama?

—Oh sí, a varias otras damas.

El señor Longdon dio la impresión de oír aquello con agrado:

—Tiene usted razón. En Beccles no le sacamos suficiente provecho al domingo.

—¡Huy, en Londres se lo sacamos de sobra! —dijo Vanderbank—. Y me parece que más bien redundará en mi beneficio mencionar que la señora Brookenham me llama *a mí*…

Ahora su visitante lo abrumó con una atención que operó como freno:

—…¿por su nombre de pila? —Antes de que Vanderbank pudiese atenuar esto en alguna medida, el señor Longdon preguntó—: ¿*Cuál* es su nombre de pila?

De improviso Vanderbank se sintió casi culpable: como si su respuesta no pudiera sino imputarle extravagancia a la dama.

—Mi nombre de pila —lo dijo ruborizándose— es Gustavus.

Su amigo dio conscientemente un paso arriesgado:

—¿Y ella lo llama Gussy?

—No, ni siquiera Gussy. Pero a duras penas me parece lícito contárselo —prosiguió— si ella misma no le ha ofrecido ningún atisbo. Cualquier inferencia de que ella se ha abstenido a sabiendas podría abismarlo a usted en aún más negras profundidades.

Vanderbank habló con marcada jocosidad, pero tras un momento su compañero le mostró un semblante absorto —y un tanto apesadumbradamente— en la visión de esa posibilidad descartada por el tono bromista.

—¡Oh, no soy tan sumamente perverso! —exclamó con modestia el señor Longdon.

—Bueno, ella no siempre me llama como me llama —dijo riendo Vanderbank— y no es nada, además, comparado con el modo como son llamadas otras personas. Fíjese, hay un individuo que… —Se contuvo, empero, y, pensándolo mejor, escogió otro ejemplo—: La duquesa (¿no le han presentado a la duquesa?) nunca me llama otra cosa que «Vanderbank» excepto cuando me llama «*caro mío*». No habría costado mucho hacerla dirigirse *a usted* con un «¡Longdon, sinvergonzón!». Casi puedo oírla.

Concretando el efecto de aquel bosquejo, el señor Longdon extrajo su conclusión con un indulgente «¡Ah, caramba, una duquesa *extranjera*!». Sabía hacer distingos.

—Exacto: odiosamente, cruelmente extranjera —convino Vanderbank—; de hecho yo nunca había visto a una mujer servirse tan hábilmente, para resarcirse por la deshonra de esa característica, de los privilegios e inmunidades inherentes. Ha florecido en el invernadero de su viudedad: es una napolitana empollada por una incubadora.

—¿Napolitana? —Cortésmente, el señor Longdon pareció desear haberlo sabido antes.

—Lo era su marido; pero tengo entendido que los duques en Nápoles son de tanto ringorrango como los príncipes en Petersburgo. Ya murió, de todas formas, el pobre hombre, y ella ha regresado para vivir aquí.

—Melancólicamente, supongo… después de haber vivido en Nápoles[8] —aventuró el señor Longdon.

—¡Huy, haría falta más que incluso un pasado napolitano…! Sea como fuere —agregó el joven, refrenándose—, ella no vive concentrada en lo que dejó atrás, sino en lo que tiene delante: vive concentrada

en su preciosa pequeña Aggie.

—¿Su pequeña Aggie? —El señor Longdon exhibió un cauteloso interés.

—Ahora no estoy tomándome ninguna libertad —sonrió Vanderbank—. Hablo tan sólo de la joven Agnesina, una niña, sobrina de la duquesa o más bien, creo, de su marido, a la cual ella ha adoptado (para que ocupe el lugar de una hija tempranamente muerta) y traído a Inglaterra para casarla.

—Oh, con algún hombre importante, claro está.

Vanderbank reflexionó:

—No lo sé. —Emitió un vago pero expresivo suspiro—: Es realmente preciosa la pequeña Aggie.

El señor Longdon se mostró ostentosamente subrepticio:

—Entonces tal vez *usted* sea el hombre…

—¿Parezco importante? —espetó Vanderbank.

Separándose un poco de él, una vez más su visitante contempló la habitación:

—¡Cielos, sí!

—Pues entonces, para enseñarle hasta qué punto está usted en lo cierto, ahí tiene a la damisela. —Señaló un objeto sobre una de las mesas: una pequeña fotografía contorneada por una ancha orla fabricada de algo que parecía como piel carmesí.

El señor Longdon alzó el retrato; ahora se puso serio:

—Es muy hermosa… pero no es una niña.

—En Nápoles se desarrollan muy rápido. Sólo tiene diecisiete o dieciocho años, calculo; pero yo nunca discierno cuán adultas (o por lo menos cuán infantiles) son las muchachas, así que no estoy seguro. Una tía, en todo caso, por supuesto no tiene nada que encubrir. Ella es extremadamente bonita, con una extraordinaria cabellera roja y una tez a tono: cosas muy infrecuentes, tengo entendido, en esa raza y esas latitudes. Me regaló el retrato ella misma… con marco y todo. El marco es bastante napolitano y la pequeña Aggie es encantadora. —Entonces Vanderbank completó—: Pero no tan encantadora como la pequeña Nanda.

—¿La pequeña Nanda? ¿La tiene usted *a ella*? —El anciano se mostró muy ilusionado.

—Está ahí junto a la lámpara: también un obsequio del original.

II

El señor Longdon se acercó hasta ese sitio; la pequeña Nanda estaba introducida en una acristalada madera blanca. La alzó y la sostuvo; durante unos momentos no dijo nada, mas enseguida, por encima de sus lentes, posó sobre su anfitrión una mirada aún más intensa que su escrutinio de la pálida imagen.

—¿Ahora van por ahí regalando sus retratos? —inquirió.

—¿Las muchachas, las candorosas angelitas? Desde luego, a sus amigos queridos. ¿Acaso no lo hacían en tiempos de usted?

El señor Longdon tomó a estudiar el retrato; tras una exhalación de algo entre la suficiencia y la pesadumbre, respondió:

—Nunca lo hicieron conmigo.

—¡Pues ahora puede recibir todos los retratos que quiera! —dijo riendo Vanderbank.

Con la cabeza su amigo ejecutó un lento, extraño ademán negativo:

—¡No los quiero «ahora»!

—¡Aún puede usted hacer con ellas, mi querido señor —insistió Vanderbank en el mismo tono—, todas y cada una de las cosas que *yo* hago!

—Estoy seguro de que no hace usted nada que no deba. —El señor Longdon todavía sostenía la fotografía y siguió mirándola—: La madre de Nanda me habló sobre ella: me prometió que la próxima vez yo podría verla.

—Debe usted verla; es una gran amiga mía.

El señor Longdon continuaba absorto:

—¿Nanda es inteligente?

Vanderbank le dio vueltas a aquello y replicó:

—Vaya, ya me contará usted si se lo parece.

—¡Oh, con una muchacha de diecisiete años…! —protestó el señor Longdon como temeroso de tener que pronunciarse—. ¿Esta, también, *tiene* diecisiete?

Una vez más Vanderbank reflexionó, y contestó:

—Dieciocho. —De nuevo hizo una tregua, luego espetó—: Bueno, digamos casi diecinueve. Asisto a todos sus cumpleaños —dijo riéndose.

Su compañero se aferró a esa idea:

—¡Palabra de honor que lo mismo me gustaría hacer *a mí*! ¿Cuándo es el próximo?

—Aún le queda a usted tiempo de sobra: el 15 de junio.

—Lamento mucho tener que aguardar. —Depositando el objeto que había estado examinando, el señor Longdon se dio otro paseo por la habitación, y su porte constituyó tal apelación a su anfitrión para que excusara su continua agitación que, desde el extremo de un sofá, este último lo contempló con aprobación —. Hace un instante le dije que conocí a todas las madres, pero habría hecho más honor a la verdad decir a todas las abuelas. —Se detuvo frente al sofá, después hizo un gesto hacia la imagen de Nanda—: Conocí a la de *ella*. Dio una cifra más baja.

Vanderbank permaneció más bien sin comprender:

—¿La vieja dama? ¿Qué cifra?

Por un instante, el semblante del señor Longdon denotó que tanteaba el camino:

—Me refería a la señora Brookenham. Me contó que su hija sólo tenía dieciséis años.

Ante el tono de esta afirmación, se desbordó el regocijo de su compañero:

—¡Suele hacerlo! Lleva haciéndolo, creo, desde hace uno o dos años.

El señor Longdon se dejó caer en el sofá como bajo el peso de algo repentino y novedoso; luego, desde donde se había sentado, con un pequeño movimiento brusco arrojó al fuego la colilla de su cigarrillo.

Vanderbank le ofreció uno nuevo, y mientras él lo aceptaba y lo encendía dijo:

—No sé qué extraño influjo ejerce usted sobre mí: ¡en casa nunca fumo tantísimo! —Pero se puso a fumar a chupadas cortas y, estando sentado tan próximo a Vanderbank, puso su propia mano sobre el hombro de éste como para ayudarse a expresar algo demasiado delicado para sacarlo a la luz y sin embargo demasiado importante para guardárselo—. Ahora bien, ésa es la clase de cosa a que me refería… como una de mis impresiones. —Vanderbank siguió desorientado, y él continuó—: Aludo (si no le importa que lo diga) a lo que usted ha dicho hace un momento.

Vanderbank cobró conciencia de un profundo deseo de sonsacarle lo que quiera que fuese que acechara dentro de él: así de perceptible resultaba, extrañamente, que lo que quiera que hubiese de bueno dentro de él era asimismo enteramente personal. Mas nuestro joven amigo hubo de meditar unos instantes:

—Entiendo, entiendo. Nada es más probable que yo haya dicho alguna bellaquería; pero ¿cuál de mis precisas atrocidades?

—Pues bien, haber insinuado que ella rebaja la edad de su hija…

—…¿para hacer otro tanto con la suya propia? —Vanderbank lo afrontó abiertamente—: ¿Ha sido una bellaquería hacer eso? Entiendo, entiendo. Sí, sí: puede decirse que la he puesto al descubierto, y a usted le parece chocante (y es encantador que *deba* parecérselo) porque usted pertenece, desde todo punto de vista, a una tradición mejor y, sabiendo que la señora Brookenham es amiga mía, no puede concebir que uno le haga a una amiga una jugarreta tan vulgar y odiosa. Además probablemente usted imagina que es el tipo de cosa que debemos de estar haciéndonos constantemente unos a otros: le da la impresión de que, a diestra y siniestra, probablemente, nunca nos cansamos de hacemos jugarretas. Bien, pues seguramente es así. Sí, «si nos paramos a reflexionarlo», como dicen en Norteamérica, eso es lo que hacemos. Pero ¿qué quiere que le diga? A efectos prácticos todos lo sabemos y lo toleramos, y no nos preocupa mayormente. A fin de cuentas, ¿qué es la vida londinense? ¡Un donde-las-dan-las-toman!

—Caramba, y ¿qué hay de la amistad? —preguntó el señor Longdon seria y conmovedoramente, mientras seguía asiendo el brazo de Vanderbank como bajo el conjuro de las vividas explicaciones con que había sido obsequiado.

El joven no hizo sino acoger su mirada con aún mayor cordialidad:

—¿La amistad?

—La amistad. —El señor Longdon mantuvo el pleno valor de la palabra.

—Pues —aventuró su compañero— me atrevería a decir que de ningún modo la amistad es en Londres lo mismo que en Beccles. Eso es lo que quiero literalmente decir —agregó corroboradoramente Vanderbank —; en verdad nunca he creído en la existencia de la amistad en las grandes sociedades: en las grandes ciudades y las grandes muchedumbres. Es una planta que requiere tiempo y espacio y aire; y la sociedad londinense es una enorme «aglomeración», como la denominamos elegantemente: una turba asfixiante, opresiva, sudorosa, parlanchina.

—¡Ah, no diga *eso* de ustedes! —protestó el señor Longdon retirando su mano y con un visible escrúpulo ante el generalizador comentario suscitado.

—¡Sí, sí, digámoslo, por el amor de Dios: dejemos que alguien lo diga, para que sirva de algún provecho, cualquiera que sea éste! Es imposible decir demasiado; es imposible decir bastante. Nadie puede decir nada que yo no esté dispuesto a ratificar.

—Eso demuestra que es cierto que a usted le da igual —repuso penetrantemente el anciano.

—¡Ah, somos irredimibles, si es a eso a lo que se refiere! —dijo riendo Vanderbank.

—¡Le da igual, le da igual! —reiteró su visitante—; y (si puedo ser sincero con usted) no me extrañaría que fuera toda una lástima.

—¿Una lástima que me dé igual?

—No debería ser así, no debería ser así. —El señor Longdon hizo una pausa—. ¿Puedo decir todo lo que pienso?

—¡Le aseguro que eso voy a hacer *yo*! Es usted enormemente interesante.

—Y usted también, si a eso vamos. Es precisamente lo que se me ha metido en la cabeza. ¡Me parece discernir en usted algo…! —Abruptamente dejó inacabado este comentario, empero, para tomar otra dirección—: Recuerdo al resto de la familia de usted, pero ¿por qué yo nunca lo había visto *a usted*?

—Yo debía de estar en la escuela, o en la universidad. Tal vez conoció usted a mis hermanos mayores y menores.

—Había un chico que acudía a Malvern con la madre de usted. La frecuenté allí durante tres meses en… ¿*qué* año fue ése?

—Sí, ya sé —repuso Vanderbank mientras su invitado procuraba fijar la fecha—. Se trataba de mi

hermano Miles. Era endiabladamente inteligente, pero andaba mal de salud el pobrecillo, y lo perdimos a sus diecisiete años. Mi madre alquilaba residencias en lugares como ése y lo llevaba allá: se suponía que eso lo beneficiaba.

El señor Longdon había atendido evocándolo nítidamente:

—Él solía charlar conmigo: recuerdo que me planteaba preguntas que yo no sabía contestar y me hacía sentirme totalmente abochornado. Pero yo le prestaba libros… en parte, palabra de honor, para hacerlo creer que, ya que yo los tenía, sí sabía alguna que otra cosilla. Él leía de todo y tenía mucho que decir acerca de todo. Yo solía decirle a su madre que él tenía un gran futuro.

Vanderbank meneó la cabeza triste y compadecidamente:

—Ciertamente lo tenía. Y recordará usted a Nancy, que era bastante guapa y normalmente iba con ellos —continuó.

El señor Longdon semejó tan inseguro que él explicó que se refería a su otra hermana; ante lo cual su compañero dijo:

—¿Ah, ella? Sí, era encantadora; evidentemente también ella tenía todo un futuro.

—Pues actualmente está inmersa en él. Está casada.

—Y ¿quién es su marido?

—Un sujeto apellidado Toovey. Un hombre que trabaja en la City.

—¡Ah! —dijo algo perplejo el señor Longdon. Después inquirió como para subsanar su perplejidad—: Pero ¿por qué la llama usted Nancy? ¿Su nombre no era Blanche?

—Exacto: Blanche Bertha Vanderbank.

El señor Longdon pareció mitad desconcertado, mitad afligido:

—¿Y ahora es Nancy Toovey?

Advirtiendo su consternación, Vanderbank prorrumpió en carcajadas:

—Así es como la llaman todos.

—Pero ¿por qué?

—Nadie lo sabe. Ya ve que estaba usted en lo cierto respecto de lo de su futuro.

El señor Longdon emitió otro de sus suaves suspiros ahogados; había vuelto a encararse con la primera de las fotografías, que contempló durante un rato más prolongado.

—Pues no eran ésas las ideas de *ella* —comentó.

—¿Las de mi madre? Ciertamente no. ¡Ah, las ideas de mi madre! —Vanderbank guardó silencio, después añadió con gravedad—: Falleció a tiempo.

El señor Longdon hizo un ademán de darse la vuelta y pareció en un tris de responder algo a esto; pero en vez de ello tornó a entregarse a un examen del expresivo óvalo en el marco de felpa rojiza. Alzó a la pequeña Aggie, quien pareció interesarlo, y comentó abruptamente:

—Nanda no es tan bonita.

—No, ni por asomo. Habría que ver si puede decirse que Nanda sea bonita en modo alguno.

El señor Longdon siguió inspeccionando a la muchacha más favorecida; lo cual lo movió a espetar tras un instante:

—Debería serlo, ¿sabe usted? La abuela de Nanda lo era.

—Huy, y la madre de Nanda lo es —intervino Vanderbank—. ¿No considera usted preciosa a la señora Brookenham?

El señor Longdon lo hizo aguardar unos instantes, y por fin dijo:

—No tan preciosa como Lady Julia. Lady Julia tenía… —Titubeó; después, como si hubiese demasiado que decir, zanjó la cuestión—: Lady Julia lo tenía todo.

Del sonido de estas palabras Vanderbank sacó una impresión que lo indujo cada vez más a la diplomacia:

—Pero ¿no es eso precisamente lo que también tiene la señora Brookenham?

Esta vez el anciano fue raudo:

—Sí, es muy brillante, pero eso es algo bien distinto. —Depositó a la pequeña Aggie y comenzó a desplazarse como sin un propósito definido; pero enseguida Vanderbank advirtió que su propósito era echarle un nuevo vistazo a la otra muchacha. Como por casualidad y distraídamente, volvió a inclinarse hacia el retrato de Nanda—: Lady Julia era exquisita, y esta jovencita es exactamente igual que ella.

Vanderbank, cada vez más consciente de que algo lo trabajaba por dentro, se sentía cada vez más interesado.

—Si Nanda es tan igual que ella, ¿ella era tan exquisita? —aventuró.

—Oh sí; todo el mundo convenía en ello. —El señor Longdon mantuvo la mirada sobre aquel rostro, un

poco intentando, según llegó a pensar Vanderbank, ocultar el suyo propio—. Fue una de las mayores bellezas de su época.

—En tal caso, ¿Nanda es tan igual que ella? —insistió Vanderbank, divertido ante la diafanidad de su amigo.

—Asombrosamente. Su madre me lo ha contado todo sobre ella.

—¿Le ha contado que es tan bella como su abuela?

El señor Longdon le dio vueltas a aquello:

—No: que tiene exactamente la misma expresión que Lady Julia. No cabe duda de que la *tiene*: puedo verlo aquí. —Se mostraba deliciosamente taxativo—. Se parece muchísimo más a la muerta que a la viva.

En estas palabras Vanderbank percibió demasiadas honduras como para no explorarlas hasta el final. Una fue, sin ir más lejos, que su amigo no había sucumbido más que parcialmente al atractivo de la señora Brookenham, si es que de hecho, merced a una refinada originalidad, no se había sustraído enteramente al mismo. Esto por sí solo, para un observador profundamente versado en esta dama, resultaba gracioso e intrigante. Otro síntoma fue que se notó a sí mismo, a despecho de semejante ruptura en la cadena, nítidamente predispuesto en favor de Nanda.

—Entonces, si Nanda es una reproducción tan vivida de Lady Julia —insinuó el joven—, ¿por qué le parece a usted mucho menos bonita que la extranjera amiga de Nanda, amiga que pensándolo bien tampoco es ningún portento?

El destinatario de esta apelación, con una de las fotografías en la mano, dirigió un vistazo, mientras reflexionaba, a la otra. Entonces dijo con una sutileza que de momento estuvo a la altura de la de Vanderbank:

—Usted mismo acaba de decirme que la personita extranjera…

—…¿es con mucho la más preciosa de las dos? En efecto. Pero usted ha convenido sin tardanza. Es la primera vez —prosiguió Vanderbank, a fin de dejarlo en la estacada con mayor delicadeza— que oigo que la señora Brookenham reconoce la pinta de la muchacha.

—¿La de su propia hija? ¿«Reconocerla»?

—Me refiero a afirmar que es siquiera tan buena como realmente lo es. A mí mismo, debo decírselo, su pinta me agrada inmensamente. Creo que la nieta de Lady Julia tiene en su rostro, pese a todo…

—¿Qué entiende usted por todo? —espetó el señor Longdon con tal aproximación al enojo que el regocijo de su anfitrión rebosó.

—Ya lo verá… cuando lo vea. Nanda no tiene rasgos. No, ni uno solo —ahondó Vanderbank inexorablemente—; a no ser que digamos que tiene dos o tres de sobra. Lo que iba a decir es que Nanda exhibe en su expresión todo lo que de encantador hay en su carácter. Pero la belleza, en Londres —y, notando que había conquistado la atención de su visitante, se dio el gusto de desarrollar libremente su idea —, la belleza sensacional, cegadora, chillona y despampanante, tan obvia como un cartel en una valla, un anuncio de jabón o whisky, algo que llame la atención de la muchedumbre y atraviese las candilejas, alcanza tal cotización en el mercado que la ausencia de ella inspira, en una mujer con una hija casadera, infinitos terrores y constituye para la desventurada pareja (por referirnos tan sólo a madre e hija) una especie de bancarrota mundana. Londres no adora lo latente o lo prometedor, no tiene tiempo ni gusto ni sensibilidad para nada que sea menos palmario que la bandera roja en la parte delantera de una apisonadora. Quiere el dinero a tocateja y letras de tres metros de altitud. Por consiguiente, ya lo ve, para la pobre Nanda todo esto es un feo asunto: un asunto que, en cierto modo, acapara el primer término de la pequeña vida interior de su madre. ¿Qué pinta *tendrá*, qué se opinará de ella y qué estará en condiciones de lograr? Ella está atravesando una edad en que toda esta cuestión (hablo de su apariencia, de su posible cuota de rasgos cautivadores) está todavía, valga la expresión, en tinieblas. Pero de ello depende todo.

A estas alturas, el señor Longdon había vuelto a situarse cerca de él:

—Disculpe que me repita (es que incurre usted en cada elipsis…), pero, de nuevo, ¿qué entiende usted por todo?

—Caramba, su casamiento, naturalmente. Y sobre todo que su casamiento sea rápido.

El señor Longdon permaneció frente al sofá:

—¿Qué entiende usted por rápido?

—Vaya, por aquí sin duda nos levantamos más tarde que en Beccles; pero eso nos da, ya ve usted, días más cortos. Entiendo antes de un par de temporadas. Lo bastante pronto —amplió Vanderbank— para atajar la desazón… —Otra vez se interrumpió, con buen humor, ante la expresión de su amigo.

—¿Qué entiende usted por la desazón?

—Pues la contrariedad de que ella esté presente.

—De que ella esté presente ¿dónde?

—¡Vaya que es usted exhaustivo! —dijo riéndose Vanderbank. Pero se mostró perfectamente dispuesto —: Fuera del cuarto de los niños, que es donde está actualmente. En el salón de tertulias de su madre. Junto al fuego del hogar de su madre.

El señor Longdon se quedó extrañado:

—Pues ¿dónde debería estar si no?

—Junto al de su propio marido, ¿no se da cuenta?

El señor Longdon miró como si se diera perfecta cuenta, mas no por ello estuvo dispuesto, en lo relativo a su indagación primordial, a ser desviado:

—Oh, desde luego —respondió con una leve rigidez—, pero no como si la hubieran introducido arrojándola por la chimenea. Cada cosa a su debido tiempo.

Vanderbank volvió las tomas contra él:

—¿Qué entiende usted por su debido tiempo?

—Caramba, el suficiente para que ella se haga amar.

Vanderbank se quedó pasmado:

—¿Por los hombres que acuden de visita a esa casa?

El señor Longdon atenuó ligeramente esa manera de expresarlo:

—Sí, y dentro del círculo social de su propia familia. ¿Dónde está la «desazón»… de que ella sea aceptada como miembro del mismo?

III

Ante esto, Vanderbank abandonó su extremo del sofá y, con las manos en los bolsillos y un aire tan divertido que habría podido tomarse por excitado, dio unos pasos por la habitación mientras su interlocutor, observándolo, esperaba una respuesta. Como quiera que dicha respuesta se hizo esperar durante un minuto, ahora el anciano fue quien se sentó, y entonces Vanderbank se detuvo enfrente de él con un semblante en el cual un elemento se había avivado de un modo aún más llamativo:

—Usted me pregunta más cosas de las que puedo responderle. Usted me pregunta más cosas de las que me parece que sospecha usted. Debe venir a visitarme otra vez, debe permitirme ir a visitarlo. Usted plantea las más interesantes cuestiones, y tarde o temprano habremos de ventilarlas todas.

Ante semejante perspectiva el señor Longdon pareció contento, pero una vez más sacó su reloj:

—Faltan cinco minutos para la medianoche. Lo cual significa que debo marcharme ya.

—De eso nada. Hay aclaraciones que también usted debe brindar. —Con mano irresistible, Vanderbank lo confirmó en su ubicación y lo obligó a aceptar otro cigarrillo. La oposición del anciano sonó insincera: claramente se trataba, a su juicio, de una ocasión de sacrificarse. Igual de pronunciado fue entretanto el parecer de su compañero—: Ya sabe que todavía hay muchísimas cosas que por simple cuestión de cortesía debe usted contarme.

El señor Longdon permaneció sentado cual un cantante tímido instado a atacar los primeros compases:

—Ya le conté todo en casa de la señora Brookenham. Ahora mismo recuerdo hasta qué punto me confié a usted.

—Lo que me contó —replicó Vanderbank— fue estupendo en su limitada medida; pero a fin de cuentas consistió exclusivamente en que, habiendo reparado en mi apellido, usted le había preguntado a nuestra amiga si yo pertenecía a una familia que usted había conocido hacía años y entonces, a tenor de lo que ella le contestó, usted había inferido, sintiendo lo que tuvo usted la gentileza de calificar como un gran placer, que en efecto así era. Tras esto, usted se me acercó después de la cena y me proporcionó a mí un placer aún mayor. Pero eso sólo nos hace recorrer parte del camino. —El señor Longdon no dijo nada, pero en sus deliberados silencios había una nota de agradecimiento: constituían un homenaje a las constantes frases felices de su joven amigo. De hecho este personaje semejó interpretarlos cada vez más de ese modo; lo cual no dejó de tener algún efecto sobre su temple. Por último, iniciando un vuelo de alguna altura, puso fin a la pausa—: Usted estaba enamorado de Lady Julia. —Después, como quiera que la actitud de su invitado, quien serenamente se enfrentó a su mirada, fue prácticamente una aportación al debate, él prosiguió con la sensación de haber dado en el clavo—: Usted fue rechazado por ella y nunca se casó.

Fue hermosa la sonrisa del señor Longdon; resultó tan expresiva que cuando enseguida principió a hablar pareció como si ya hubiese contado la mitad de su propia historia:

—Vaya, mi vida adoptó cierto método. No tenía más remedio, o no sé lo que habría sido de mí, y colaboraron a sacarme de apuros varias cosas que sobrevinieron todas juntas de improviso. Mi padre murió; heredé aquella pequeña propiedad en Suffolk. Mi hermana, la única que yo tenía, la cual estaba casada y era mayor que yo, perdió en el plazo de uno o dos años tanto a su marido como a su hijito. La invité a venir al campo, pues su aflicción era más honda que la mía. Ella vino, y se quedó; la cosa siguió así año tras año, y allí pasamos nuestra vida juntos. Nos compadecíamos mutuamente, y de algún modo ello nos consolaba. Pero murió hace dos años.

Vanderbank asimiló todo esto, sólo que deseando mostrar —a estas alturas deseándolo con entero afecto — que incluso era capaz de leer entre líneas todo lo no dicho. Rellenó otro de los intervalos de su amigo:

—Y aquí está usted. —Luego invitó al propio señor Longdon a dar la gran zancada—: Pues bien, usted va a tener un gran éxito.

—¿Qué entiende usted por un gran éxito?

—Caramba, que vamos a entusiasmamos tantísimo con usted que su vida se le convertirá en algo abrumador. Muy pronto verá a qué me refiero.

—Es posible —dijo el anciano—; para comprenderlo a usted, no tendré otro remedio que ver eso. Usted me habla de algo que, hasta ahora (llegado casi al término de mi vida), no he conocido en modo alguno. De joven no tuve ningún éxito. Quiero decir ningún éxito del tipo que más me importaba. La gente no me prestaba atención.

—Pues bien, *nosotros* le prestaremos atención —declaró Vanderbank. Luego añadió—: ¿De qué gente habla? —Y antes de que pudiera contestar su amigo, aventuró—: ¿De Lady Julia?

Fue tácito el asentimiento del señor Longdon:

—¡Ah, ella no fue la peor! Quiero decir que lo que lo hacía tan penoso —continuó— era que en realidad todas me apreciaban. Y la madre de usted, me parece (me refiero a *eso*: al temible, consolatorio «aprecio»), aún más que las otras.

—¿Mi madre? —se sorprendió Vanderbank—. ¿Quiere decir que hubo la posibilidad…?

—Oh, pero nada más que durante medio segundo. Ella no lardó mucho en tomar su decisión. Fue cinco años después de la muerte del padre de usted. —Esta explicación fue ofrecida con gran delicadeza—. Ella *podía* casarse de nuevo.

—Y supongo que se enteraría usted de que lo hizo —repuso Vanderbank.

—¡Me enteré bien pronto! —Tras esto, abruptamente, el señor Longdon hizo un movimiento hacia adelante—: Buenas noches, buenas noches.

—Buenas noches —dijo Vanderbank—. Pero ¿eso no fue *después* de lo de Lady Julia?

En el borde del sofá, apoyado en las manos, el señor Longdon lo encaró:

—Ya no volvió a haber nada después de lo de Lady Julia.

—Entiendo. —Su compañero sonrió—. Lo de mi madre fue anterior.

—Ella fue extremadamente amable conmigo. No estoy hablando de aquella temporada en Malvern eso tuvo lugar posteriormente.

—Perfectamente: ya me hago idea. Usted habla de los primeros años de la viudedad de mi madre.

El señor Longdon titubeó:

—Yo los llamaría más bien los últimos. Seis meses más tarde se produjo su segundo matrimonio.

Visiblemente se intensificó el interés de Vanderbank:

—Ah, ¿fue *entonces*? Por aquella época yo tenía siete años. —Recordó las circunstancias y las ensambló —: En tal caso ella debía tener más años que usted.

—Sí: unos pocos. Para mí ella fue la amabilidad personificada, de todos modos, entonces y posteriormente. Ahí estaba el encanto de las semanas en Malvern.

—Entiendo —dijo riéndose el joven—. El encanto provenía de que usted ya se había recobrado.

—¡Cielos, no! —exclamó, más bien para su desconcierto, el señor Longdon—. Me temo que no me había recobrado en absoluto… no había superado, si a eso es a lo que se refiere, mi dolor y mi melancolía. Ella sabía que yo no los había superado… y eso era lo amable de ella. Ella era una persona con quien yo podía hablar de ella.

Vanderbank tardó un instante en disipar la ambigüedad:

—¡Ah, quiere decir que ustedes dos podían hablar de *la otra*! Usted no había superado lo de Lady Julia.

El señor Longdon le sonrió tristemente:

—¡Y sigo sin haberlo superado! —Entonces, no obstante, como para no parecer demasiado desconsolado, hizo un esfuerzo por ser lúcido—: El primer batacazo fue duro… pero de ése uno siempre se recobra. La madre de usted, maravillosa mujer, supo ayudarme. Por aquella época Lady Julia era íntima amiga suya: fue la madre de usted quien nos presentó. No logró evitar lo que ocurrió luego; hizo lo que pudo. Lo que hace un instante quise decir es que, en épocas posteriores, cuando lo propiciaban las oportunidades, la madre de usted era la única persona con quien yo siempre podía hablar y que siempre comprendía. —El señor Longdon pareció sumirse un momento en aquellos hondos recuerdos para dar fe de los cuales sólo él había sobrevivido; después exhaló un suspiro como si el sabor de todo aquello volviera a él con una lánguida dulzura—: Me parece que ambas se portaron bastante bien conmigo. Cuando aquella temporada en Malvern (el preciso periodo que le he mencionado hace poco), Lady Julia ya se había casado y durante esos primeros años llevaba una vida demasiado ajetreada como para que nos tratáramos con asiduidad. Más tarde su vida fue remansándose; volvimos a vemos; frecuenté, durante mucho tiempo, su casa. Creo que más bien le gustaba el estado a que ella misma me había reducido, aunque jamás, ¿sabe?, se aprovechó o presumió de ello en lo más mínimo. Cuanto mejor es una mujer (así lo he pensado muchas veces), más le agrada, de un modo discreto, que algún individuo sufra, que se descorazone y desespere, con ella… por ella.

Quiero decir que con seguridad, aunque Lady Julia insistía en que yo debía casarme, en el fondo no le habría gustado mucho que lo hiciese. De todas maneras fue en aquellos años cuando contemplé a su hija empezar a dejar de ser una niña: la niña que con el tiempo se transformaría en la muy distinta persona con quien hemos cenado esta noche. Ello vuelve a mi memoria cuando lo oigo a usted hablar del crecimiento, a su vez, de la propia hija de dicha persona.

—¡Lo comprendo con toda el alma! —respondió Vanderbank—. Se reproduce la misma situación.

—Oh, sólo parcialmente, no absolutamente. Los elementos que difieren… vaya, difieren *tantísimo*. —Por un instante, tras esto, el señor Longdon atalayó a su compañero con una mirada que delató uno de esos pequeños brincos inquietos de su pensamiento—. Hace un rato le dije que me parece discernir en usted algo.

—¿Algo que estaba destinado a mejores cosas? —Vanderbank recogió de buen talante sus palabras—. En *mí* hay algo, lo creo de veras…, destinado a cosas muchísimo mejores. Tal es el tipo de cosas con las cuales me gusta que se suponga que poseo una genuina afinidad. Ayúdeme a alcanzarlas, señor Longdon; ¡ayúdeme a alcanzarlas, y no sé qué no sería yo capaz de hacer por usted!

—¡Así que, al fin y a la postre —y el anciano expuso su parecer con cándida agudeza—, usted *no* es irredimible!

—Bueno, por lo que respecta a mí particularmente… ¿cómo expresárselo? Si le digo —siguió Vanderbank— que poseo esa especie de fulcro para la salvación que consiste en por lo menos una profunda autoconciencia y la ausencia de la más mínima pizca de autoengaño, semejaré estar diciendo que soy diferente del mundo en que me muevo y en la misma medida estar presentándome como superior y desdeñoso. De todas maneras concédame una oportunidad. Déjeme concederme una oportunidad a mí mismo. No me abandone. Averigüe qué puede hacerse conmigo. A fin de cuentas quizá tenga yo remedio. Desde luego pienso aferrarme a usted.

—Usted es demasiado inteligente, demasiado inteligente: ¡es el mismo problema de todos ustedes! —suspiró el señor Longdon.

—¿De *todos* nosotros? —hizo de eco Vanderbank—. Querido señor Longdon, es la primera vez que escucho tal cosa. Si usted dijera el problema *mío* peculiar, algo de verdad podría haber en ello. Lo que usted quiere decir, de todas formas (ya veo adónde va usted a parar), es que somos gente fría y sarcástica y cínica, sin el menor resquicio de cariño o compasión. Creo que nos halaga aunque al mismo tiempo pretenda amonestamos; pero lo que en todo caso resulta extremadamente interesante es que, según colijo, durante esta velada le hemos causado, en un especial sentido, toda una impresión colectiva: algo en que se ven diluidas nuestras insignificantes disparidades personales. —Ante esto, el rostro de su visitante semejó decirle que estaba exponiendo el caso a la perfección, de suerte que él se sintió alentado a proseguir—: Hubo algo especial con que no se sintió enteramente complacido.

El señor Longdon, que, paladinamente, mudaba de color con facilidad, exhibió en su pálida mejilla los resultados simultáneos de sentir que habían puesto el dedo en su llaga y maravillarse ante la perspicacia de su compañero. Mas aceptó la situación:

—No pude menos que reparar en el tono de ustedes.

—¿Quiere decir en el hecho de que fuera un tono tan mezquino?

El señor Longdon, que en un principio había sonreído, ahora se puso serio:

—¿De veras desea saberlo?

—¿Que si deseo saber la impresión que le causamos? Le aseguro que no hay nada, en este instante, que más desee yo saber.

—No soy ningún juez —reanudó la plática el anciano—; no soy ningún crítico; ni siquiera tengo facilidad de palabra. Soy anticuado y estrecho y romo. Durante años y más años he vivido en un pueblecito perdido. No soy un hombre de mundo.

Vanderbank lo escudriñó con una benevolencia, una cordialidad de aprobación, que literalmente precisó refrenar por miedo a parecer paternalista. Y dijo:

—Ninguno de nosotros le llega a la altura del zapato. Es usted encantador, es usted maravilloso, y siento la más intensa curiosidad por escucharlo —insistió el joven—. ¿Somos absolutamente odiosos? —Notando el confuso, finalmente casi dolorido semblante de su amigo, tal aire de agradecer tanta sinceridad y de no obstante mirar con recelo tanta despreocupación, Vanderbank no pudo menos que proponerse suavizar el asunto y allanar el camino—: Ya ve que no tenemos la menor idea de adónde hemos ido a parar. Estamos perdidos… y usted viene y nos encuentra. —Mientras él hablaba, por fin el señor Longdon se había dispuesto realmente para marcharse, llegándose hasta la puerta con un estilo que denotó, empero, no tanto saturación cuanto una conciencia que en verdad se sentía demasiado turbada. Vanderbank lo había

ayudado a ponerse la capa escocesa y por unos instantes lo retuvo asiéndola—: Sólo dígame una cosa, por gentileza. ¿Es que los del grupo nos dedicamos a charlar…?

—…¿demasiado audazmente? —murmuró especulativamente, con su clara mirada tan intocada por el paso del tiempo, el señor Longdon.

—Demasiado ultrajantemente. Quiero la verdad.

Para el señor Longdon evidentemente la verdad no era fácil de expresar:

—Pues… desde luego es una charla diferente.

—Diferente de la que practicaban usted y Lady Julia, ya me hago cargo. Bueno, claro está que con el tiempo es natural que se produzca *alguna* transformación, ¿no es cierto? Pero ¿tan diferente —apremió Vanderbank— que se sintió realmente indignado?

Ante esto, su visitante sonrió, pero extrañamente la sonrisa tomó más adusto su semblante:

—Creo que me sentí más bien aterrorizado. Buenas noches.

Libro Segundo

LA PEQUEÑA AGGIE

IV

La señora Brookenham se detuvo en el umbral debido a la aguda sorpresa de ver a su hijo, y se advirtió decepción, aunque de una índole afligida más bien que irritada, en la pregunta que, avanzando con lentitud, le asestó:

—Si aún estás ahí arrellanado, ¿por qué hace dos horas me dijiste que te marchabas inmediatamente?

Hundido en un amplio sillón cubierto de brocado, con sus cortas piernas extendidas hacia la chimenea, él se hallaba tan cómodo que casi estaba tumbado a la bartola. Obviamente ella lo había despertado de su sueño, y él tardó un par de minutos —durante los cuales, sin tomar a mirarlo, ella se aproximó derechamente a un hermoso y antiguo escritorio francés, bello mueble estilo Luis XVI— en explicar su permanencia:

—Cambié de parecer: no pude iniciar mi partida.

—¿Quieres decir que no vas a ir allá?

—Pues estoy pensándomelo. ¿Qué puede hacer servidor? —Él se incorporó levemente, mirando hacia el fuego con concienzuda solemnidad, y si ello hubiese sido (tal como no lo era) uno de los disgustos que en general ella esperaba de él, ella habría podido tener la impresión de que el colorado semblante de su hijo se debía a ardores etílicos.

—Servidor podría no quedarse a estorbar —respondió ella— cuando tan profundamente le ha permitido a una hacerse la ilusión de que así iba a ser. —Había un manojo de llaves colgando de la cerradura del escritorio, de las cuales tomó posesión la señora Brookenham mientras pronunciaba estas palabras. Su aire de contemplarlas se había transformado prontamente en el de haber estado buscándolas, y un instante después de que hubiera atravesado la habitación ya estaban en su bolsillo—. Si no vas ahí, ¿qué excusa piensas dar?

—¿Quieres decir qué excusa *te* pienso dar, mamá?

Ella estaba delante de él, y ahora lo miró sombríamente:

—¿Qué te ocurre? ¡Vaya momento más oportuno para descabezar un sueñecito!

Él se había replegado en el sillón, desde cuyas profundidades enfrentó la mirada materna:

—Caramba, es *precisamente* el momento oportuno, mamá; lo he hecho a sabiendas. Yo siempre logro dormirme cuando lo deseo. ¡Te aseguro que eso lo ayuda a uno a ver más claras las cosas!

Ella le volvió la espalda con impaciencia y, echando un vistazo por la habitación, sobre una mesita del mismo estilo que el escritorio reparó en un libro un tanto masivo con la etiqueta de una biblioteca circulante, que ella procedió a coger como si buscara refugiarse de la impresión que le había producido su hijo. Él la observó hacer esto y luego la observó hacer una breve pausa ante la amplia ventana que, en Buckingham Crescent, dominaba la perspectiva para cuyo disfrute la familia se había ramificado por los cuartos que daban a la parte posterior: una mezcolanza de ahumado ladrillo y manchado estuco, de otras desnudas fachadas traseras, de cristales envidiablemente opacos, de tejados y contaminantes chimeneas y establos perversamente próximos: uno de esos panoramas privados que en Londres, en contadas ocasiones, disparan, como suele decirse, el alquiler. En este momento, empero, no había indicios de valía en el carácter que le era conferido al escenario por la fría lluvia primaveral. Además, en el lugar se echaba de ver un notorio vacío típico de final de temporada. Ella parecía haber escogido el silencio para que constituyera el presente marchamo de su relación con Harold, y sin embargo pronto fracasó en su empeño por resistirse a una bastante pobre razón para romperlo:

—Ten la bondad de levantarte de mi sillón.

—¿Qué estás dispuesta a hacer por mí —preguntó él— si te complazco?

Él no movió ni un músculo —pero como sólo para comunicarse con ella aún más directa e íntimamente — y ella tornó a colocarse junto al fuego y sondeó el extraño y humilde semblante filial.

—No sé a qué se debe exactamente, pero a veces me produces una especie de terror.

—¿De terror, mamá?

Ella se llegó hasta otro asiento, dejándose caer tristemente y abriendo el libro, y al instante siguiente él se puso en pie y se acercó a darle un beso, ante lo cual ella apartó impacientada la mejilla.

—Me tienes hasta la coronilla —dijo ella con voz trémula— y te abandono a tu destino.

—¿Qué entiendes por mi destino?

—Oh, algo espantoso… aunque sólo sea por su carácter públicamente ridículo. —Ella pasó distraídamente las páginas de su libro—. Eres demasiado egoísta, demasiado repulsivo.

—¡Eh, caramba! —silbó él asombrado mientras volvía sobre sus pasos hasta la alfombrilla de chimenea sobre la cual, con las manos juntas tras la espalda, permaneció cierto rato. Era bajito y ligeramente cargado de hombros, lo cual extrañamente le infundía cierto carácter: un carácter en cierto modo de tipo insidioso, reflejado en el afilamiento, difícil de referir a un origen, de su terso rostro blanquecino, cuyos rasgos eran totalmente curvos pero su expresión totalmente puntiaguda. Poseía la voz de un hombre de cuarenta años e iba vestido —manifiestamente no como para quedarse en Londres— con un aire de experiencia que parecía estar a tono con aquello. Se estiró el chaleco, adecentándose, pasándose la mano por el bien arreglado cabello y examinándose los zapatos; después de lo cual le dijo a su madre—: Te he cogido cinco libras. Y también dos de los soberanos —continuó—. Te he dejado dos libras con diez. —Ante esto ella alzó la cabeza violentamente, encarándolo consternada, e, incorporándose de inmediato, volvió junto al escritorio—. Estoy diciéndote la verdad —siguió él—; debiste echarle llave *antes*, ¿no te parece? El escritorio me sonreía tentadoramente con toda su pasta gansa, y ¿qué podía hacer yo? Querida mamá, no podía *iniciar* mi partida: es la pura verdad. Pensé que hallaría algo de dinero (me había fijado); y espero que me permitas quedármelo, porque, si no, me hundes. Me he demorado adrede: adrede, es decir, para contarte lo que había hecho. ¿Tú no llamarías a eso sentido del honor? Y ahora lo único que haces es quedarte ahí poniéndome mala cara.

La señora Brookenham, a sus cuarenta y un años, aún era encantadoramente bonita, y lo más cerca que en este momento llegaba a corresponder a la descripción que acababa de hacer su hijo, era pareciendo hermosamente desesperada. Plenamente había en ella la luz pura de la infancia, siempre la habría en ella: su cabeza, su tipo, su elasticidad, sus esporádicos sonrojos, sus preciosos ojos alocados, su melodioso acento espontáneo, se confabulaban a este efecto mediante algún secreto que hasta ahora nunca había sido descubierto. Al mismo tiempo resultaba notable que —por lo menos en el seno de su familia— rara vez ella exhibía una apariencia de alegría menos restringida que la de la presente coyuntura: ella sugería, por lo común, el vigor y la lozanía de la pena, el apasionamiento de extraños pesares y el cultivo de exquisitos desapegos. Ésta era su peculiar enseña: una ingenuidad oscuramente trágica. Eso multiplicaba el efecto de sus otros recursos. Abrió el escritorio con la llave que prestamente había identificado, luego con la ayuda de otra abrió de un tirón un cajoncito; tras lo cual volvió a cerrar de un tirón el cajoncito, echándole llave al conjunto.

—Me aterras —dijo otra vez.

—¿Cómo puedes decir eso cuando acabas de demostrarme lo bien que me conoces? ¿Acaso no es porque sabías lo que yo podía hacer por lo que nada más entrar te apoderaste de las llaves? —El estilo de Harold tenía una manera especial de arreglar las cosas siempre que hallaba oportunidad de hablar sobre sí mismo.

—Eres repugnante a más no poder, y voy a contarle esto a tu padre. —Tras lo cual, encaminándose al sillón que él había dejado libre, la madre de Harold volvió a apoltronarse con su abultado libro. No había habido rabia, empero, en su voz, ni siquiera una áspera queja: tan sólo un indiferente, resignado disgusto. La suprema rebeldía de la señora Brookenham frente al destino consistía en dejar ver con la mayor franqueza su fastidio.

—No, querida mamá, no vas a contarle esto a mi padre; vas a hacer cualquier cosa que se te antoje excepto eso —replicó Harold, cual si estuviera gentilmente explicando la personalidad de ella en beneficio de ella misma—. Te agradezco inmensamente el encantador modo como te tomas lo que he hecho; fue porque estaba seguro de ello por lo que me he quedado para hacértelo saber. Es muy bonito eso de decirte que voy a estar fuera algunos días tributando una visita… pero ¿cómo narices iba a iniciar mi partida sin un solo penique? ¿No comprendes que si deseas que esté yendo de acá para allá, debes hacerte realmente cargo de mis necesidades?

—Me gustaría que me dejaras de una vez, me gustaría que te marcharas de casa sin perder más tiempo —insistió la señora Brookenham sin alzar la vista.

Harold sacó su reloj:

—Muy bien, mamá, ahora *estoy* listo; antes no lo estaba en modo alguno. Pero esto va a ser, ya sabes,

como lanzarme a la ventura. Pues ¿es que de veras piensas (necesito oírte lo que de veras piensas) que van a dárseme bien las cosas?

Por último ella lo atalayó con su hermoso *pathos*:

—¿Quieres decir tu visita a Brander?

—Ya sabes —contestó él con su método de parecer dejarla ver la propia actitud de ella—, ya sabes que procuras obligarme a hacer cosas que jamás en la vida harías tú misma. Por lo menos tengo la esperanza de que no las harías. Y ¿no te das cuenta de que si te complazco a este respecto, al menos debo ser retribuido de algún modo?

Su madre se recostó en el sillón, miró hacia el techo durante un instante y después cerró los ojos.

—*Eres* aterrador —dijo—; eres horroroso.

—Siempre estás deseando hacerme marcharme de casa —insistió él—; me parece que desearías hacemos marchamos *a todos*, pues te las compones para que Nanda asome la nariz aún menos que yo. ¿No crees que tus hijos sean lo bastante presentables, mamá querida? En todo caso está más claro que el agua que si no nos mantienes en casa debes mantenemos en otros lugares. No se puede vivir gratis en cualquier sitio: es una trola eso de que uno ahorra alojándose en casa de otras personas. No sé cómo será en el caso de una mujer, pero, a efectos prácticos, a un hombre se lo admite[9]…

—¿Sabes que me matas, Harold? —intervino abrumada la señora Brookenham. Pero con la misma remota melancolía fue como, al siguiente segundo, preguntó—: ¿Acaso no fue una *invitación* esto de ir a Brander?

—Fue como ya te lo he contado. Ella dijo que me escribiría, para fijar una fecha; pero luego no me escribió.

—Pero ya que *tú* le escribiste…

—…¿viene a ser lo mismo? ¿Lo *es*?: ésa es la cuestión. Sabiendo que a raíz de mi carta ella no contestó, quiero decir. ¿Se debe interpretar sencillamente como que sí que desean mi presencia? Me ayuda oírte decir estas cosas *a ti*, madre. Yo hago, me parece, todo lo que me ordenas; pero para sentirme seguro y confiado necesito *oírtelas*. ¿Cualquier persona *desearía* mi presencia, eh?

La señora Brookenham ya había abierto los ojos, pero aún los mantenía fijos en la comisa:

—Si ella no deseara tu presencia, habría contestado a tu carta. En una gran mansión como ésa siempre hay sitio.

El joven la contempló unos instantes, y espetó:

—¿Cómo es que te gusta *tanto* acostamos pronto y luego quedarte tú levantada hasta las tantas? ¿Qué es lo que quieres hacer, a fin de cuentas? ¿A qué juegas, mamá?

Ella se incorporó, ante esto, recorriendo con la mirada la habitación cual desde el último grado del martirio o la melancolía de alguna meditación profunda. Y no obstante cuando habló lo hizo con una expresión distinta, una expresión que para un observador habría servido de notable ilustración de esa descoordinación de sus impulsos que con frecuencia resultaba risible aun hasta el grado de contribuir al éxito social de la señora Brookenham:

—O sea que te has gastado más de cuatro libras en cinco días. El viernes fue cuando te las di. ¿Qué diablos supones que va a ser de mí?

Harold siguió contemplándola como si la pregunta requiriera alguna respuesta realmente incisiva:

—¿Es que estamos viviendo por encima de nuestras posibilidades?

Ahora ella desplazó su mirada hacia el suelo:

—*Por favor*, ¿quieres marcharte ya?

—Todo sea por ayudarte. Sólo que si *descubriese* que no es deseada mi presencia…

Ella afrontó, tras un instante, la mirada de él, y nunca había sido tan grande la enfermiza preciosidad y alocamiento de la suya propia:

—*Haz* que tu presencia sea deseada, y no descubrirás eso que dices. Eres inaguantable, pero no tonto.

Ahora él le dio un abrazo de despedida, y ella se sometió como si le resultara absolutamente indiferente cúyo fuera el pecho contra el cual la estrecharan.

¡Mamaíta —exclamó riendo—, dices unas cosas tan lindas! —Y tras esto él se llegó hasta la puerta, al abrir la cual se detuvo ante un ruido procedente de la planta baja—: ¡La duquesa! Está subiendo las escaleras.

La señora Brookenham le echó un rápido vistazo a la habitación, mas habló con total desinterés:

—Pues que las suba.

—Por mí como si las baja. Pero interpreto esto como una feliz señal de que *ella* no estará en Brander. —Permaneció con la mano en el picaporte; aún le quedaba una rápida pregunta que hacer—: Y ¿qué hago a

partir del martes?

La señora Brookenham ya se había levantado y había recorrido la mitad de la habitación con ese deslizamiento que parece apático pero que en realidad es una notable forma de actividad, y les había dado un toque rectificador, sobre el sofá y los sillones, a tres o cuatro almohadones arrugados. Lo había hecho con la misma triste cabeza inclinada de un lirio roto.

—Debes quedarte allá hasta el 12.

—Pero ¿y si *soy* expulsado a patadas?

Fue como un lirio roto como ella meditó sobre aquello:

—En ese caso vete a visitar a los Manger.

—¡Feliz idea! Entonces, ¿debo escribirles?

Su madre levantó un poco más una persiana; y dijo:

—No: ya lo haré yo.

—¡Mamá encantadora! —Y Harold le envió un beso por los aires.

—Espera, he cambiado de opinión —rectificó ella—. Escríbeles… desde Brander. Eso es algo que cautivará a los Manger. Telegrafíales incluso.

—¿Ambas cosas a la vez? —preguntó el muchacho riéndose—. ¡Mi querida y buena mamá! —exclamó —. Y ¿desde dónde vas a comunicárselo *tu*?

—Desde Pewbury —contestó sin inmutarse—. Les escribiré el domingo.

—Muy bien. ¿Qué tal le va, duquesa? —Y Harold, antes de esfumarse, saludó con una veloz concentración de todos los matices de la campechanía a una alta dama imponente, la visitante que él había anunciado, la cual se erguía en la entrada con las maneras de una persona acostumbrada a llegar a los umbrales de modo muy semejante a como las personas llegan a las estaciones ferroviarias: esperando encontrarse con un «recibimiento».

V

—Hasta pronto. Mi hijo se marcha —le explicó a su visitante la señora Brookenham, quien permaneció inmutable en su zona de la habitación.

—¿Adónde se marcha? —inquirió dicha visitante adelantándose desapegadamente y mirando no tanto a su anfitriona cuanto a los almohadones retocados.

—Oh, a varias residencias campestres. Hoy a Branden.

—¡Hay que ver cuánto corretea tu hijo de un lado para otro! —Y la duquesa, todavía lanzando miradas acá y allá, se dejó caer en el sofá hasta el cual se había acercado sola. La señora Brookenham sabía perfectamente el propósito de dichas miradas: ella sólo poseía tres o cuatro muebles relativamente buenos mientras que la duquesa, rica en tesoros de Italia, sólo poseía tres o cuatro relativamente malos. Tal era la relación, como entre amigas íntimas, que visiblemente prefería la duquesa, y resultaba más bien infundado, en Buckingham Crescent, entrar siquiera alguna vez en el salón con semblante receloso de una deslealtad. La duquesa era una mujer que cultivaba sus pasiones tan celosamente que habría juzgado desleal introducir allí un nuevo mueble de un modo clandestino… es decir, sin una abierta consulta a ella, la autoridad suprema, ni el consiguiente otorgamiento de la potestad de cercenar en flor cualquier desatino. Repetidas veces la señora Brookenham se había preguntado de dónde diantres habría podido sacar el dinero necesario para ser desleal. ¡El nivel de exigencia de la duquesa era tan elevado!… A este respecto su nivel de exigencia estaba en consonancia con sus demás características, que resultaron tan conspicuas como de costumbre cuando dicha dama se sentó con aire de desear tomar el té aunque fuese temprano para ello. Siempre tenía aire de desear tomar el té antes de la hora, y su amiga, aunque con una muy distinta impaciencia, siempre llamaba para ordenarlo—. ¿Quién más va a ir a Brander? —preguntó.

—No tengo la menor idea; Harold no me lo ha dicho. Pero allí siempre hay un buen montón de gente.

—Sí, ya lo sé: insólitas mezcolanzas. ¿Harold ya ha estado allí anteriormente?

La señora Brookenham caviló:

—Oh, sí (si mal no recuerdo), más de una vez. De hecho la carta que ella le escribió (que él me enseñó, pero que sólo decía «algunos amigos») era una especie de solicitación fundamentada en alguna que otra cosa que había tenido lugar la última vez.

La duquesa guardó silencio un instante.

—Ella escribe las más increíbles cartas —dijo por último.

—Pues ésta fue muy agradable, en mi opinión —dijo la señora Brookenham—, proviniendo de una mujer de esa edad y de ese elevadísimo rango y estando dirigida a un hombre tan joven.

De nuevo la duquesa reflexionó:

—Amiga mía, ella no es norteamericana ni está sobre el escenario. ¿No es eso lo que en este país se entiende por un rango elevado? Ni tampoco tiene cien años.

—Ya, pero Harold no es más que un bebé.

—¡En ese caso no parece andar falto de niñeras! —respondió la duquesa. Sonriendo, le dijo a su amiga —: Tus hijos se parecen a la madre que les dio el ser: eternamente jóvenes.

—¡Bueno, *yo* no tengo cien años! —protestó la señora Brookenham como si con oscura perversidad ansiase tenerlos—. En cualquier caso, todo el mundo es rematadamente amable con Harold. —Aguardó un momento para darle a su visitante ocasión de dictaminar que ello era muy natural, mas no hizo acto de presencia ningún dictamen: nada salvo el lacayo que acudió en respuesta a la llamada y a quien se le ordenó el té—. Y ¿adónde has dicho que vas a ir *tú*? —inquirió tras esto.

—¿Durante la Semana Santa? —La duquesa logró retener la cautivadora mirada de la anfitriona… lo cual no resultaba, en términos generales, una proeza fácil—. Yo no he dicho que fuese a ir a ninguna parte. No he modificado, de golpe, mis costumbres. Tú ya sabes si alguna vez dejo sola a mi niña… excepto en el

sentido de haberla dejado hace una hora en la clase que el señor Garlick imparte sobre Literatura Ligera Contemporánea. Confieso que me siento un tanto nerviosa respecto de la asignatura y voy a pasarme a recogerla a las cinco.

—Y, después, ¿adónde te la llevarás?

—A casa para que tome el té; ¿adonde pensabas que podía llevármela?

La señora Brookenham declinó, en relación con esta interrogación, la responsabilidad de cualquier hipótesis; de hecho estuvo mucho más afortunada cuando tras un instante dijo:

—¡*Eres* una madre consagrada!

—La señorita Merriman tiene hoy su tarde libre; no logro imaginarme qué hacen con sus tardes libres —agregó—. Pero a las siete ha de estar de vuelta en el cuarto de la niña.

—Y ¿tú te haces cargo de Aggie hasta entonces?

—Hasta entonces —dijo la duquesa animadamente. Y continuó—: Vosotros os vais, durante la Semana Santa, a… ¿cómo se llama?

La señora Brookenham había acogido sin ningún sonrojo delator las diversas agudezas así insinuadas por su visitante, y de momento su única venganza fue semejar tan dulcemente resignada como si de veras comprendiese lo implicado en las mismas. ¿Adónde se iban ellos durante la Semana Santa? Hubo de pensar un instante, mas lo mencionó:

—Ah, a Pewbury: nos habíamos comprometido desde hace tanto tiempo que ya se me había olvidado. Vamos allí una vez al año; servidora lo hace por Edward.

—¡Huy, lo mimas demasiado! —sonrió la duquesa—. ¿Quién más va a ir allí?

—Oh, los de siempre, supongo. Una multitud de pesados partidarios de Su Ilustrísima.

—¿Para rendirle honores? Entonces ¿por qué invitan a pobres seres como vosotros?

La señora Brookenham asumió, ante esto, un aire adorablemente —vale decir, perplejamente— serio:

—¿Cómo puedo saber, mi querida Jane, por qué diantres se nos invita adondequiera que sea? ¡Figúrate a la gente anhelando la presencia de Edward! —dijo con entrecortado estupor—. Y sin embargo nunca podemos zafamos de Pewbury.

—¡Os va mejor atrapados por Pewbury, *cara mia*, que zafándoos de ello! —replicó benignamente la duquesa. Era persona de no poca presencia, que llenaba el lugar, empero, sin avasallamiento, con una masividad por demás mantenida muy hábilmente dentro de sus justos límites. Su cabeza, su barbilla, sus hombros iban bien altos, pero no había negligido el cuidado de su «tipo» o cualquiera de las más distinguidamente refinadas causas para ser considerada una mujer admirable. Además estaba secretamente en guerra, en este empeño, con un enemigo encubierto no menos que con uno manifiesto, y era plenamente consciente de que si no conseguía parecer hermosa, podría tan sólo esporádicamente, y a base de denodados esfuerzos, parecer decente. Había obvios recursos de salvación, ninguno de los cuales ella descuidaba y de la suma de los cuales, tal como se felicitaba a sí misma, resultaba casi matemáticamente un aire de distinción. Superficialmente este aire correspondía a sus adquiridas rimbombancias calabresas, empezando por su voluminoso título nobiliario, pero el pelo incoloro, la frente desapasionada, la blanda mejilla y el estirado labio de la típica matrona británica, la tipología que a ella le había tendido una celada antes que cualquiera de las demás, eran elementos difíciles de manejar y constituían todo cuanto, por momentos, podía advertir un observador agudo. Conque el campo de batalla era el obsesionante peligro de todo *bourgeois*. No le dejó tiempo a la señora Brookenham para resentirse de su última observación, pues ella ya había pasado a inquirir si Nanda iba a acompañar al matrimonio.

—Cielos, cielos, no; ella no ha sido invitada. —La señora Brookenham, a beneficio de su hija, claramente irradió oscuridad—: Mis hijos nunca se presentan donde no han sido invitados.

—Nunca he dicho que lo hicieran, preciosa —repuso la duquesa—. Pero entonces ¿qué haces con ella?

—Si quieres decir socialmente —la señora Brookenham habló como si en alguna lejana esfera, por la cual casi suspirara, pudiese haber otras oportunidades maternas bien distintas de aquélla—, si quieres decir socialmente, no hago nada de nada. Nunca he fingido hacer nada. Sabes tan bien como yo, querida Jane, que aún no me he puesto a ello. —Ahora la anfitriona de Jane hablaba con tanta llaneza como una vehemente niña seria. Exhaló un vago suspiro paciente—: ¡Supongo que debería ponerme a ello ya!

Durante un rato la duquesa permaneció más bien severamente silenciosa.

—¿Cuántos años tiene? —inquirió por fin—. ¿Veinte?

—¡Treinta! —dijo la señora Brookenham con quintaesenciada dulzura. Después agregó sin transición de tono—: Se ha ido a pasar unos días en compañía de Tishy Grendon.

—¿En el campo?

—Esta noche se aloja con ella en Hill Street. Mañana se marchan de la capital juntas. ¿Por qué no ha

estado acudiendo Aggie? —prosiguió la señora Brookenham.

La duquesa se quedó elegantemente extrañada:

—Acudiendo ¿adónde?

—Caramba, aquí, para visitar a Nanda.

—¿Aquí? —hizo de eco la duquesa, manifiestamente tomando a echarle un abarcador vistazo a la habitación—. ¿Acaso alguna vez se ve aquí a Nanda?

—Oh, ya sabes que le he puesto una habitación propia: la habitacioncita más encantadora del mundo. —La señora Brookenham nunca parecía tan feliz como cuando se veía precisada a dar explicaciones—. Allí tiene todo lo que una muchacha podría desear.

—Mi querida amiga —preguntó la duquesa—, ¿tiene allí alguna que otra vez a su propia madre?

En este momento habían entrado los criados para disponer la mesa del té, y a los movimientos del pelirrojo lacayo fue a lo que prestó atención la señora Brookenham.

—Mejor pregúntaselo personalmente a mi hija —dijo.

La duquesa se mostró franca y jovial:

—¡Lo haría, te lo prometo, si alguna vez lograra ponerle la vista encima! Pero ¿no está siempre con ella esa mujer?

La señora Brookenham alisó el bordado mantelito del té:

—¿Llamas «esa mujer» a Tishy Grendon?

Otra vez la duquesa hizo una de sus pausas, que durante sus conversaciones con esta íntima eran tan frecuentes que a veces un oyente se habría preguntado qué precisa forma de desahogo significaban. Habrían podido ser un hábito causado por el miedo a exhibir una indebida irritación. Suponiendo que la duquesa se sintiera tan irritada con la señora Brookenham como aparentemente lo habría parecido sin ellas, la asiduidad de sus visitas, como opuesta a la hipótesis de la irritación, habría requerido ser satisfactoriamente explicada.

—¿Cómo la llamas *tú*? —demandó.

—Diantre, la mejor amiga de Nanda… si es que no la única. Ese es el puesto que me *habría* gustado ver ocupar a Aggie —sonrió la señora Brookenham con toda la finura del mundo.

A raíz de esto, yendo más lejos que ella, la duquesa dio rienda suelta a un generoso regocijo:

—Mi querida criatura, eres deliciosa. Aggie *o* Tishy es una idea de lo más halagadora. Ya que tienes la amabilidad de preguntar por qué se ha distanciado Aggie, me perdonarás que te conteste que tú misma acabas de mencionar la razón. Desde el primer instante en que arribamos a Inglaterra has estado al corriente de lo que opino sobre cuáles son las personas apropiadas (y las que son sumamente inapropiadas) para que Aggie se trate con ellas. Personas como Tishy Grendon distan de ser las apropiadas.

La señora Brookenham siguió colaborando un poco en los preparativos del té:

—¿Por qué no decir de una vez, Jane —y su entonación, en este requerimiento, fue casi pueril—, que has terminado englobando incluso a la pobre Nanda, respecto de tus maravillosos propósitos relativos a Aggie, dentro de la misma clase intolerable?

La duquesa se tomó su tiempo, pero finalmente afrontó su deber:

—Muy bien, si así lo quieres. Ya sabes mis ideas. Si no entra en mi noción de cómo debe educarse a una muchacha el abandonarla, en su temprana juventud, a una intimidad con una joven casada que es a la vez infeliz y estúpida, cuya conversación no conoce absolutamente ninguna cortapisa, que suelta todo lo que se le pasa por la cabeza y que le habla a la pobre niña acerca de sólo Dios sabe qué… si yo jamás soñaría con una relación semejante para mi sobrina, igual de poco puedo aceptar la perspectiva de ponerla *demasiado* en contacto, ¿te das cuenta?, con cualquier adolescente expuesta a una experiencia semejante. Desde luego formaría parte del orden natural de las cosas —orden a despecho del cual la duquesa hizo esta declaración con un énfasis sólo moderado— el que, puesto que el querido Edward es mi primo, Aggie se relacionara con Nanda por lo menos tanto como con cualquier otra muchacha de su edad. Pero ¿qué quieres que te diga? Debo tener en cuenta los aprietos en que me pone la cada vez más insólita evolución de las costumbres inglesas. Han cambiado muchas cosas, bien lo sabe Dios, desde que yo tenía la edad de Aggie, pero nada es tan distinto como lo que ahora hacéis todas con vuestras hijas. Todo esto es un desorden, una vergüenza, una monstruosidad, lo mismo que todas las demás cosas que se os ocurren; nunca he visto en el mundo cosa igual. *Yo* sólo concibo un método coherente, que es nuestro hermoso antiguo método extranjero y que produce (en las clases altas, entiéndeme, pues son las únicas que me interesan) *des femmes bien gracieuses*. Aludo a la costumbre inmemorial de la estirpe de mi marido, costumbre que fue lo bastante buena para su madre y para la madre de su madre, para la propia madre de Aggie, para las otras hermanas de mi marido, para *toutes ces dames*. Habría sido lo bastante buena para mi hija, como yo la llamo (mi querido marido la

llamaba hija *suya*), si, no habiendo perdido a sus progenitores, se hubiese quedado en su propio país. Allí habría sido educada bajo una mirada vigilante, ése es el quid: personalmente, esmeradamente, tiernamente, y con lo que *no* debía aprender (hasta el momento oportuno) tan controlado como todo lo demás. Yo no puedo sino continuar con ella siguiendo ese mismo espíritu y hacer de ella, con la ayuda de la Providencia, lo que considero que debe ser cualquier adolescente de su condición, de su apellido, de sus peculiares tradiciones. *Voilá, ma chère*. Si me preguntases si creo que tú rodeas a Nanda de alguna seguridad parecida a ésa, no podría remediarlo si te ofendiese con una respuesta sincera. A lo que todo va a parar, hablando en plata, es a que en verdad ella debe elegir entre Aggie y Tishy. Me temo que yo te dejaría de una pieza si hubiera de revelarte lo que opinaría de mí misma si despachara a *mi* hija, completamente sola, a pasar una semana fuera con la señora Grendon.

La señora Brookenham, que poseía numerosos talentos, acaso no poseía ninguno que se le antojara más persistentemente útil que el de escuchar con el aspecto de estar francamente hipnotizada. Así era como escuchaba a su ama de llaves durante sus acostumbradas conferencias matutinas, y si a menudo la respuesta subsiguiente parecía no tener nada en común con dicho aspecto, ése era un enigma que concernía exclusivamente al interlocutor.

—Oh, naturalmente conozco tu teoría, querida Jane, y sin duda es sumamente entrañable y adulta y, si quieres, aristocrática, de un rancio y disparatado modo arcaico… aunque incluso sobre eso, al mismo tiempo, también habría mucho que decir. Pero no puedo sino congratularte por hallarla más factible de lo que jamás habrá posibilidad de que yo la halle. Aunque tú estés perfectamente pertrechada para los sacrificios de que hablas, sencillamente yo no lo estoy. No creo ser un monstruo, pero tampoco pretendo ser una santa. Soy una esposa inglesa y una madre inglesa, y vivo en el heterogéneo mundo inglés. En todo caso, mi hija es ni más ni menos que hija mía, gracias a Dios, y miembro de un hermoso haz de hijos ingleses: no es la sobrina única de mi difunto marido italiano, e indudablemente tampoco pertenece, a pesar de su excelente cuna, a un linaje, como el de Aggie, tan tremebundo. Tengo una vida que vivir, y ella no es más que parte de la misma. ¿Azúcar? —concluyó con una nota todavía más suave mientras le pasaba la taza de té.

—¡Jamás! Pues bien, en *mi* caso —dijo con brío la duquesa— ella lo sería todo.

—¡«Todo» se dice muy pronto! La vida está compuesta de muchas cosas —tintineó gentilmente la señora Brookenham—: ¡de hebras tan variopintas y entretejidas! —Después preguntó todavía cual campanilla de plata—: ¿De veras no te parece simpática Tishy?

—Me parece que las muchachitas deberían convivir con las muchachitas y que las jóvenes *femmes du monde* tan enormemente iniciadas deberían… vaya —dijo la duquesa meneando la cabeza—, dejarlas en paz. ¿Qué pretenden de ellas «en verdad de la buena»?

—Caramba, querida mía, si Tishy te parece «iniciada», todo lo que a servidora se le ocurre preguntar es «Iniciada ¿en qué?». Igual de acertado me parecería aplicarle semejante calificativo a un tembloroso corderito esquilado. ¿Forma parte de tu teoría —continuó la señora Brookenham— que nuestras desventuradas hijas incasadas no deban tener amigas inteligentes?

—De veras desventuradas —espetó la duquesa— precisamente *porque* están incasadas, e incasadas, si no te importa que lo diga, en buena medida porque son incasables. A fin de cuentas, los hombres, los hombres majos (con lo cual me refiero a los hombres aceptables), no van en busca de jóvenes novias cuyas compañías habituales sean tan despabiladas. Su idea no es que las muchachas con quienes se casan hayan de estar ya tan informadas (mediante conversaciones y contactos y visitas y periódicos, y la forma como las pobres criaturas husmean prematuramente por todas partes y todas las cosas insólitas que hacen) de absolutamente *todo*. La amiga más inteligente de una muchacha es su madre… o la parienta que actúe como tal. ¡A lo mejor consideras que Tishy desempeña tu función!

La señora Brookenham aguardó tanto rato a decir lo que consideraba, que, antes de que volviera a abrir la boca, la cuestión pareció haber quedado olvidada. Entonces se limitó a preguntar como si súbitamente recordara las exigencias de la buena educación:

—¿Te apetece algo de merendar? —Señaló un plato en concreto—: ¿Uno de esos deliciosos redondelitos? —La duquesa se hizo con un delicioso redondelito y enseguida su anfitriona prosiguió—: Hay una cosa que no he de olvidar: no debemos comérnoslos *todos*. Me parece que son lo que en el fondo atrae aquí a Lord Petherton.

La duquesa acabó imperturbablemente su bocado antes de recoger aquellas palabras:

—¿Se presenta aquí tan asiduamente?

La señora Brookenham vaciló:

—No sé cómo lo califica él; pero ayer dijo que se presentaría hoy. He ordenado el té antes de la cuenta

por ser vos quien sois —siguió con su más melancólica deferencia—, y él siempre llega tarde. Pero no por eso debemos, entre las dos, zampamos el contenido entero de la bandeja.

Con gran adecuación la duquesa adoptó el mismo tono de su compañera:

—Huy, yo no me siento nada obligada a tomarme molestias por él, pues últimamente él no se ha tomado especiales molestias por mí. No ha venido a visitarme desde no sé cuándo, y la última vez se trajo consigo al señor Mitchett.

—Aquí ocurrió exactamente al revés. Fue el señor Mitchett, hace unos años, quien por primera vez trajo a Lord Petherton.

—Y ¿quién —preguntó la duquesa— había traído por primera vez al señor Mitchett?

Por unos instantes la señora Brookenham, sosteniendo la mirada de su amiga, pareció intentar recordar. Luego repuso:

—Renuncio. Yo siempre confundo los inicios.

—No importa, con tal que tú los *decidas* —sonrió la duquesa.

—Sí, ¿verdad? —A lo cual agregó la señora Brookenham—: ¿Fue por Aggie por lo que se trajo consigo al señor Mitchett?

—Si así fue, debieron de sentirse muy decepcionados. Ninguno de ellos le ha visto, en mi casa, siquiera la punta de la nariz. —La duquesa proclamó esta circunstancia con cierta prosopopeya de orgullo.

—Ah, pero con tus ideas eso no estorbará.

—¿Qué es lo que eso no estorbará?

—Caramba, lo que tú llamas, supongo, los *pourparlers*.

—¿Para pedir la mano de Aggie? Querida mía —dijo la duquesa—, me alegra que me hagas la justicia de pensar que soy persona consciente de que las ocasiones las pintan calvas. No fue, tal como seguramente recuerdas, con la visión del señor Mitchett como empezó a absorberme la cuestión de la mano de Aggie. Me avergonzaría de mí misma si no tuviese siempre presente dicha cuestión y si no mantuviese las antenas desplegadas en más de un sentido. Pero todavía no he llegado a pensar en el señor Mitchett (quien, por muy rico que sea, es hijo de un zapatero y superlativamente horripilante), por una razón que no tengo inconveniente en participarte. No te indignes si menciono que durante mucho tiempo he esperado que tú misma serías quien acabaría ocupándose debidamente de él. —Hizo una pausa… esta vez con una transitoria falta de seguridad, de la cual emergió, no obstante, con una eclosión de vehemencia que resultó francamente aristocrática—: Discúlpame si te cuento de una vez por todas lo que pienso. Me siento atónita de ver que no pareces prestar atención ni a tu interés ni a tu deber. Oh, ya sé cuánto te gustaría hacerlo, pero me pareces (dentro de tu perfecta buena fe, por supuesto) despistada y sin saber por dónde tirar. Son una misma y única cosa, ¿no caes en la cuenta?, tu interés y tu deber. Caramba, ¿no es tan claro como la luz del día que lo que hay que hacer con Nanda es sencillamente casarla, y casarla rápido? Ése es el quid: hazlo mientras *puedas*. Si no deseas que ella esté presente en las tertulias (lo cual, permíteme decirlo, no me extraña en lo más mínimo) tu remedio es optar por la alternativa acertada. No la mandes con Tishy…

—…¿sino con el señor Mitchett? —preguntó la señora Brookenham entrecortadamente pero sin enojo. Se le habían subido visiblemente los colores durante la alocución de su visitante, mas en su voz no hubo irritación—. ¿Cómo sabes, Jane, que no deseo que ella esté presente en las tertulias?

La duquesa la miró con un atrevimiento reforzado por un semblante desprovisto de cualquier cosa excepto de protesta:

—¡Ahí lo tienes: las eternas posiciones falsas de los ingleses! *J'aime, moi, les situations nettes… je n'en comprends pas d'autres*. No redundaría en tu honor (en el de tus escrúpulos) que, con tu inadmisible círculo de amistades, *desearas* plantar a tu hija en medio del salón. ¡Pero una forma de mantenerla alejada consistente en confiársela a una…!

—¡Caray, Jane, vaya si me cuentas lo que piensas! —atajó benignamente la señora Brookenham. Se había recostado en su asiento; sus manos, sobre su regazo, estaban firmemente entrelazadas, y su enfermiza sonrisa hizo brotar una lágrima de cada uno de sus propios ojos debido al mismísimo esfuerzo por hacerla aún más radiante. Se habría podido inferir que le desagradaba parecer preocupada, pero que asimismo experimentaba otros desagrados—. ¡Si servidora hubiera de tomarse en serio, ya sabes, algunas de las cosas que dices!… —Y resueltamente suspiró ante la desmedida risa que ello le produciría, risa simbolizada por sus lágrimas.

Su amiga era capaz de igualar aquel grado de desapego:

—Pues bien, hija mía, *tómatelas* en serio; si hubieras de hacer eso sinceramente, prestándoles atención una por una, en verdad te acercarías mucho adonde quiero hacerte ir a parar. ¿Ves lo que quiero decir? —Pareció bastar que la señora Brookenham se abstuviera de repudiar dicha visión, y animadamente su

visitante dio un paso aún más audaz—: Todas las Tishys que ella quiera… *después*. Pero no antes.

—Después ¿de qué?

—Pues… digamos después del señor Mitchett. El señor Mitchett no la querrá después de la señora Grendon.

—Y ¿cuáles son tus fundamentos para presumir que la querrá en modo alguno? —Y, como la duquesa guardara silencio un rato, inquirió—: ¿Por casualidad te has enterado gracias a Lord Petherton?

Ante esto se enfrentaron por unos instantes las miradas de las dos mujeres, y tal vez fue consecuencia de ello la forma que adoptó la contestación:

—Me he enterado gracias a no ser tonta. A los hombres, repito, les gusta que las muchachas con quienes se casan…

—¡Oh, ya me sé tu cantinela! Cómo les gusta que sean las muchachas con quienes por ahora *no* se casan parece ser —meditó la señora Brookenham— lo que nos incumbe más urgentemente. Sería mejor que aguardaras hasta que *hayas* logrado la fortuna de Aggie, tal vez, antes de sentirte tan segura de la eficacia de tu sistema. Discúlpame, querida, si no te tomo como ejemplo hasta que te hayas vuelto un poco más manifiestamente ejemplar. En cualquier caso, la clase de hombres de los que yo sé algo no sienten debilidad por las muñecas mecánicas. Sienten debilidad por las muchachas inglesas con inteligencia, personalidad y estilo.

La duquesa le dirigió un vistazo al reloj.

—¿Cuáles son los elementos por los que siente debilidad el señor Vanderbank? —inquirió.

Su anfitriona semejó complacerla reflexionando exhaustivamente:

—¡Huy, *él*, según me temo, pobrecillo… no siente debilidad por nada!

La duquesa se había quitado un guante para ayudarse a satisfacer su apetito, pero ahora, enfundándoselo, se lo estiró:

—Creo que él tiene sus propias ideas.

—¿Las mismas que las tuyas?

—Bueno, se parecen más a las mías que a las tuyas.

—Oh, puede ser… pues él y yo —dijo la señora Brookenham— discrepamos, me parece, en exactamente dos cosas. Entonces consideras suficientemente bueno para mi hija —continuó— al pobre Mitchy, que es hijo de un zapatero y podría ser nieto de un saltamontes.

Durante unos momentos la duquesa admiró el espléndido ajuste de su guante, y dijo:

—Afronto los hechos tal como son. Es precisamente lo mismo que hago por el bien de Aggie. —Después incurrió en una cierta liviandad voluntaria—: ¿A cuánto asciende la dote de Nanda?

Pero la señora Brookenham aceptó sin inmutarse lo que quiera que fuese que, dentro de una gama que iba desde un parentesco imperioso hasta una confesa frivolidad, hubiese espoleado esa pregunta:

—Eso debes preguntárselo a Edward. Yo no tengo la menor idea.

—¡Ahí lo tienes otra vez: las virtuosas madres inglesas! Yo tengo guardada en una media vieja la pequeña fortuna de Aggie, y la recuento todas las noches. Si tú no tienes ninguna media vieja para Nanda, hay destinos peores que zapateros y saltamontes. Incluso *teniendo* una, ¿sabes?, yo no miraría con desdén al pobre Mitchy. Debemos coger lo que podemos conseguir, y yo seré la primera en hacerlo. No se puede conseguir todo a cambio de cuatro perras chicas. —Y la duquesa se puso en pie, resplandeciendo, empero, con una manifiesta luz de su fantasía—: Habla con él, querida; ¡habla con él!

—¿Quieres decir que le ofrezca a mi hija?

Ante esta entonación la duquesa se rió:

—¡Ahí lo tienes una vez más: *vous autres*! Si la idea te consterna, empleas *drôlement* tus escrúpulos. Yo le ofrecería la mía al hijo de un deshollinador si contara con las garantías primordiales. Nanda es encantadora: no le haces justicia. Yo no digo que el señor Mitchett sea apuesto o aristocrático, y tiene menos distinción de la que cabría en un dedal. Se toma, además, muchas libertades durante la charla… pero eso —agregó la duquesa con resolución— depende mucho de con quién charle. Y, después del casamiento, ¿qué más da eso? Tiene cuarenta mil al año, una excelente idea de cómo invertirlas y un buen natural.

La señora Brookenham permaneció sentada; se limitó a alzar la vista hacia su amiga:

—¿Es mediante Lord Petherton como estás al corriente de su excelente idea?

La duquesa dejó ver que se sentía desafiada, pero también que se sentía indulgente:

—Me guío por mis impresiones. Pero Lord Petherton *ha* hablado en favor de él.

—Es lo menos que puede hacer —dijo la señora Brookenham—, ya que vive enteramente de él.

—¿Lord Petherton vive… del señor Mitchett? —La duquesa se quedó mirando fijamente, pero más bien divertida que horrorizada—. Caramba, ¿acaso no es un… gran propietario?

—Y muy avispado. Se ha apropiado del señor Mitchett. ¿No lo *sabías*? —En la sorpresa de la señora Brookenham hubo una sincera lamentación.

—¿Cómo iba a saberlo… si aún me siento una extranjera aquí, cosa que a menudo más bien me alegra, y escojo mis amistades y doy mis pasos con gran cautela, te lo aseguro? ¿Cómo iba a saber nada de todos vuestros enredos y escándalos sociales?

—¡Huy, nosotros no llamamos a *eso* un escándalo social! —repuso inimitablemente la señora Brookenham.

—Bien, pues si quisieras, tienes a mano la forma de atajarlo que ya te he explicado. Desvía el curso del caudal del señor Mitchett.

—¡Oh, hay suficiente para todos! —La señora Brookenham no abandonó el tono que había asumido—. Siempre está convidándonos… a dulces, restaurantes y palcos de ópera.

—*A mí* nunca me ha convidado a nada —declaró la duquesa con satisfacción.

La señora Brookenham guardó silencio unos instantes. Y comentó:

—Lord Petherton ejerce la administración de algunos de esos convites. Nunca en toda su vida, me parece, había hecho tantísimos regalos.

—¡Ah, entonces es una vergüenza que servidora no haya recibido ninguno! —Tras lo cual, antes de llegarse hasta la puerta, la duquesa cambió de asunto—: Dices que ya nunca traigo aquí a Aggie. Si lo deseas volveré a traerla.

La señora Brookenham se quedó maravillada:

—¿Quieres decir hoy?

—Sí, en cuanto la haya recogido. Así tendré algo que hacer con ella hasta que la señorita Merriman pueda volver a hacerse cargo.

—De mil amores, queridísima; tráetela. Y creo que ella debería *tratar* al señor Mitchett.

—¿Debo también ir a buscarlo a él, en ese caso?

—Oh sí: te animo a correr ese riesgo.

Tras esto, las dos mujeres sostuvieron, tácitamente y desde lados opuestos de la habitación —la duquesa junto a la puerta, que un criado abrió antes de que ella pudiera hacerlo, y la señora Brookenham aún ante la mesa del té—, un último instante de comunión, a cuenta del cual esta vez la anfitriona no fue la primera en bajar los párpados.

—Creo haber hecho gala de elevados escrúpulos —dijo la duquesa—, pero en tal caso entiendo que quedo libre.

—Libre como el viento, querida Jane.

—Bien. —Entonces la invitada exclamó justo cuando se retiraba—: ¡Ah, queridísimo Edward! —Su pariente, como a ella le gustaba llamarlo, había llegado a la cima de aquel tramo de escaleras, y la señora Brookenham, junto a la chimenea, los oyó encontrarse en el rellano; asimismo oyó protestar a la duquesa contra el ofrecimiento masculino de acompañarla hasta la puerta. Escuchándolos, la señora Brookenham deseó que Edward aceptara la protesta y considerase suficiente dejarla encomendada al lacayo. Su mutua conciencia, no desprovista de satisfacción, de que la duquesa era una especie de prima podía compaginarse perfectamente con la opinión, tempranamente forjada, de que era absurdo acarrear con excesivas molestias por causa de ella.

VI

Cuando apareció el señor Brookenham, su esposa fue rauda:

—Ella vuelve ahora mismo para poder ver a Lord Petherton.

—¡Ah! —se limitó a decir él.

—Hay algo entre ellos dos.

—¡Ah! —repitió simplemente. Pero por parte de él habrían hecho falta muchas exclamaciones semejantes para que representaran algún ánimo de respuesta al modo de ver de cualquiera que no fuese su esposa.

—Ya antes había habido cosas —insistió ella—, pero yo no estaba segura. ¿No sabes que a veces servidora tiene un destello?

De Edward Brookenham, que a la hora de sentarse parecía hacer girar más goznes que la mayoría de los hombres, no podía decirse que tuviese pinta de saber aquello ni ninguna otra cosa. Poseía un indiferente semblante pálido, conformado y armonizado, incluso en cierta forma embellecido, por una dureza de líneas en la cual, insólitamente, no había ningún significado, ningún acento. Perfectamente afeitado, levemente calvo, con apagados ojos grises y una boca que daba la impresión de no moverse ágilmente, recordaba a un dibujo punteado obra de un maestro menor. Flaco y estirado, ítem más, y con un aire de tener aquí y allá en su persona uno o dos huesos más de lo debido, una o dos veces había sido, en bailes de disfraces, juzgado deslumbrante ataviado con un traje copiado de uno de los retratos ingleses de Holbein. Mas en cuanto le era imputada una característica como ésa hacía falta mucho tiempo para llegar a imputarle cualquier otra, mucho más tiempo de lo que aun su extrema sociabilidad, o el examen a que cualquiera hubiese sometido el problema, habían hecho posible hasta ahora. Si algo concreto había terminado por esperarse de él, tal vez fuese un compendio o una explicación de las cosas que siempre se había abstenido de decir, mas en él había algo que desde hacía mucho había aquietado cualquier anhelo y adormecido cualquier curiosidad. Nunca en su vida había contestado ninguna pregunta similar a la que acababa de plantearle su esposa y que ésta no le habría planteado de haberse temido una contestación. Tan soso y decente y aun distinguido parecía, cual si lo hubiesen creado adrede para embellecer un conjunto y hacer juego con alguna otra pieza, que su esposa, con su notable perspicacia, jamás lo habría interrogado seriamente sobre una cuestión general más de lo que habría hecho sonar, en procura de una tal respuesta, la campanilla del salón. Mas no por ello dejaba de considerárselo dotado de un gran sentido de las situaciones.

—¿Qué es lo que hay entre ellos dos? —demandó él.

—¿Qué es lo que hay entre cualquier mujer y el hombre cuyas simpatías procura ganarse?

—Caramba, a menudo puede no haber nada. Yo ni siquiera sabía que ella lo conociera especialmente —agregó Brookenham.

—Es precisamente lo que a ella le gustaría impedir que supiese nadie; y el hecho de que ella vaya a venir aquí para estar con él cuando ella sabe que yo sé que *ella* sabe, ¿te das cuenta?, que él va a presentarse aquí, es exactamente una de esas maniobras que *son* lo bastante sutiles para hacer desviarse del verdadero husmillo a una mujer que sólo tenga medio olfato. —Mientras hablaba, la señora Brookenham pareció dar fe, mediante el bonito modo soñador como hendió la nariz en el aire, de su propia tenencia de la totalidad de dicha cualidad—. Todavía no sé a punto fijo qué pensar, pero servidora nunca tarda mucho en caer en la cuenta de las cosas de esta clase.

—¿Supones que su proyecto es conseguir que él la despose? —preguntó Brookenham a su incoloro modo.

—¡Mi querido Edward! —se quejó por toda respuesta su esposa.

—Pero si ella puede verlo en otros lugares, ¿por qué habría de querer verlo aquí? —perseveró Edward con una voz ausente de entonación.

Entonación fue lo que ahora le sobró a la señora Brookenham:

—¿Quieres decir si ella puede verlo en la propia casa de él?

—Sin nata, por favor —dijo su marido—. ¿No tiene ella también una casa propia?

—Sí, pero saturadamente acaparada por Aggie y la señorita Merriman.

—¡Ah! —comentó Brookenham.

—Siempre ha habido algún hombre en su vida; siempre he sabido que lo había. Y actualmente ese hombre es Petherton —dijo su compañera.

—Pero ¿dónde está el atractivo?

—¿El de *él*? Caramba, innumerables mujeres podrían contestarte. Petherton tiene un historial envidiable.

—Pero yo quiero decir en la querida y vieja Jane.

—Pues me atrevería a decir que innumerables hombres podrían contestarte. Jane no es más vieja que cualquier otra. Y además posee grandes características.

—Oh, seguramente es estupenda —repuso Brookenham como si hubiese decaído su interés por el caso. Cabe sospechar que uno se aproximaba un poco a conocer su personalidad infiriendo que en un círculo de amistades tan populoso el hastío nunca rondaba muy lejos de él.

—Quiero decir que por ejemplo tiene una grandiosa idea del deber. ¡Jane opina que no tenemos solución!

—¿Solución?

—En lo que respecta a nuestras hijas, a nuestra vida familiar. Está endiabladamente irritada contra Tishy.

—¿Tishy? —Por un momento Brookenham pareció desorientado.

—Tishy Grendon… y contra su loca afición por Nanda.

—¿Siente una loca afición por Nanda?

—Estoy segura de que ya te conté que Nanda iba a pasar con ella la Semana Santa.

—Me parece que sí —se acordó Brookenham—, pero no mencionaste nada sobre una afición loca. Y ¿dónde está Harold? —continuó.

—Está en Brander. Es decir, estará allá a la hora de cenar. Acaba de marcharse.

—Y ¿cómo se las arregla para ir allí?

—Caramba, cogiendo el ferrocarril sudoeste. Enviarán un cochero a recogerlo en la estación.

Durante unos instantes Brookenham pareció contemplar esta declaración a la árida luz de la experiencia:

—Sólo enviarán un cochero si hay que recoger a otros invitados más.

—Pues claro que habrá otros invitados más: incontables. Cuantos más haya, mejor para Harold.

El padre de dicho joven guardó silencio un momento. Y observó:

—Posiblemente… si no se ponen muy altaneros.

—Oh —dijo la madre—, se pongan como se pongan, Harold sabe darles ciento y raya.

—También sabe comportarse como un borrico empedernido. A lo que me refería es a cómo ha conseguido que estén dispuestos a dejarlo entrar allá —explicó Brookenham.

—Canastos, igual que lo conseguiría cualquiera: habiendo sido invitado. Ella le escribió, semanas atrás.

Ante este hecho Brookenham se sintió discerniblemente impresionado, aun cuando no habría sido posible decir si su satisfacción excedía a su sorpresa:

—¿A Harold? Qué gentileza. —Dedicó otro instante a meditar, tras el cual prosiguió—: Si no envían un cochero, lo espera un paseo de ocho kilómetros en calesa… y el conductor no estará dispuesto a hacerlo gratis.

—*Enviarán* un cochero… teniendo en cuenta la carta que ella le escribió.

—¿Eso ponía?

La melancólica mirada de la señora Brookenham semejó repasar, a distancia, aquella hoja:

—No me acuerdo… pero la carta era muy afectuosa.

De nuevo Brookenham reflexionó:

—A menudo eso no impide que a un hombre se lo admita por diez chelines.

En esta previsión hubo más lobreguez de lo que había anhelado causar su esposa.

—Y bien, mi querido Edward, ¿qué quieres que haga yo? En todos los asuntos de la vida, a mi entender, a un joven siempre se lo admite por diez chelines.

—Ah, pero no tendría por qué ser así; ahí es adónde quiero ir a parar. A su edad yo no necesitaba diez chelines.

La madre de Harold retomó su libro, y dijo:

—¡Tal vez tú no cosechabas tanto éxito! Quiero decir en lugares así.

—Es que yo no pedía prestado dinero para cosecharlo… como tengo la punzante sensación de que sí hace nuestro joven tunante.

La señora Brookenham vaciló:

—¿A quién quieres decir que pide prestado dinero? ¿A judíos?

Él la miró como si la desorientación de su esposa pudiera ser tomada en serio:

—No. Los judíos, sospecho, no son tan «afectuosos» con él, tal como tú dices, como las viejas damas. Es a Mitchy a quien le saca dinero.

—¡Ah! —dijo la señora Brookenham—. ¿Estás segurísimo? —demandó a renglón seguido.

Él se había incorporado y depositado su vacía taza sobre la mesa del té, paseando luego un poco por la habitación y mirando por la ventana, igual que su esposa media hora antes, hacia la monótona lluvia y la ahora más anochecida fealdad. En esta postura retomó, con una completa inconsciencia de estar fomentando la irritación, a un problema que podía suponerse que ya habían abandonado:

—¡Harold va a disfrutar de un recorrido encantador a cambio de su dinero! —Sin embargo su compañera no dijo nada, y enseguida él retomó su plática—: No, no estoy absolutamente seguro… de que haya sido a Mitchy a quien le ha sacado dinero. Si lo estuviese haría algo.

—¿Qué harías? —Ella preguntó esto como si le fuera imposible imaginárselo.

—Hablaría con él.

—¿Con Harold?

—No: eso podría ser contraproducente. —Con las manos en los bolsillos Brookenham paseó un poco de un lado para otro; luego, con total ocultamiento del proceso de transición, espetó—: ¿Adónde nos vamos a cenar esta noche?

—A ninguna parte, gracias a Dios. Hoy bendecimos nuestra propia mesa.

—Ah… ¿con esos individuos que me has dicho y con Jane?

—Ésos no vienen a cenar. Los que vienen a cenar son los Bagger y Mary Pinthorpe y… palabra de honor, no me acuerdo.

—Ya te acordarás cuando la interfecta se presente —sugirió Brookenham, que otra vez se había situado junto a la ventana.

—No es una interfecta: son dos o tres interfectos, me parece —replicó su esposa con su indiferente ansiedad—. Pero lo que no sé es qué hay de cenar —discurrió—; tal vez haya lo mismo que el día siguiente al Domingo de Resurrección. Sí, creo que es una cena idéntica —agregó tomando a posar los ojos sobre su libro.

—Bien, pues es un descanso cenar en casa. —Y Brookenham volvió el rostro—. ¿Te importaría averiguarlo? —preguntó con un efecto un tanto abrupto.

—¿Quieres decir quién viene a cenar?

—No, eso da igual. Me refiero a si Mitchy le *ha* dejado dinero.

—Sólo puedo averiguarlo preguntándoselo a Mitchy.

—Oh, preguntárselo es algo que igualmente podría hacer yo. —Parecía decepcionado ante la falta de recursos de su esposa.

—Y ¿no deseas hacerlo?

Él miró fríamente, desde junto al fuego, por encima de la hermosura de la inclinada cabeza castaña de su esposa:

—Sería tremendamente embarazoso que Mitchy respondiera que sí.

—Y ¿piensas que la pobre de mí puede hacerlo responder que no? —Ella planteó esta pregunta como si en realidad ello fuera también su misma idea, pero eran un matrimonio que podía, incluso a solas y a diferencia de los augures fuera del templo[10], considerar cosas así sin soltar la carcajada—. Si *respondiese* que sí —aventuró la señora Brookenham—, ¿me darías el dinero?

—¿El dinero?

—Para devolvérselo a Mitchy.

Ahora había alzado la mirada hacia su marido, pero él, dándose la vuelta, se abstuvo de encararla:

—Responderá que no.

—Pues bien, si todos responden que no —comentó ella de inmediato—, es un asunto bastante sencillo. ¡Sin duda *yo* no deseo que se ensañen con nosotros! Pero ésa es la ventaja —prosiguió, casi parloteando— de tener tantos amigos tan encantadores: *no* se ensañan[11].

De nuevo éste fue un comentario de un alcance que por lo visto la mente de Brookenham no fue capaz de abarcar en su totalidad; de suerte que, haciendo una imperceptible pausa en el paseo que acababa de

reiniciar, él se limitó a preguntar:

—¿A quién te refieres con eso de «todos»?

—Caramba, si Harold le ha pedido dinero a Mitchy, seguramente se lo habrá pedido también a Van.

—¡Ah! —repuso Brookenham, como con un todavía mayor decaimiento del interés.

—Ellos no deberían prestarse a ello —declaró ella—; deberían informamos, y si no lo hacen les está bien empleado. —No obstante, ni siquiera esta observación logró suscitar una reacción en su marido, conque ella, tal como ya había contraído el hábito de hacerlo, filosóficamente se respondió a sí misma—: Pero yo supongo que si se prestan a ello no es a fin de iniciar un negocio de especulación.

Lo que Edward suponía resultó menos cristalino que nunca:

—Oh, Van no dispone de dinero para ir por ahí malgastándolo.

—Bueno, tan sólo me refiero a un soberano de vez en cuando.

—Pues bien —espetó Brookenham tras darse otra vez la vuelta—, creo que Van, ¿sabes?, es asunto tuyo.

—¡Todo *ello* parece ser asunto mío! —exclamó ella con un pequeño gemido demasiado patético para no tener un efecto cómico—. Y naturalmente lo será aún más como a Harold le dé por empezar a recurrir al señor Longdon.

—Debemos atajar eso a tiempo.

—¿Quieres decir previniendo al señor Longdon y solicitándole que nos informe de inmediato? Eso no será muy agradable —suspiró la señora Brookenham.

—Pues entonces espera y verás.

Ella sólo esperó un segundo: habríase dicho que ya veía.

—Quiero que el señor Longdon se porte bien con Harold —dijo—, y no puedo dejar de pensar que lo hará.

—Sí, pero me figuro que su idea de portarse bien con Harold será impedirle contraer deudas. Seguro que no es necesario preocuparse por el señor Longdon —añadió Brookenham—. Sabe cuidar de sí mismo.

—Parece habérselas arreglado de maravilla durante todos estos años —meditó su esposa—. Tal como lo vi en mi infancia lo veo ahora, y ahora veo que incluso entonces debí ver lo incurablemente enamorado que estaba de mamá. Es realmente encantador cuando habla de mamá —siguió la señora Brookenham.

—¡Ah! —contestó su marido.

Este tierno pasado la absorbió unos instantes:

—Ahora veo que yo debía de saber una barbaridad de cosas cuando era niña.

—¡Ah! —reiteró su compañero.

—Quiero que el señor Longdon se tome interés por nosotros. Especialmente por nuestros hijos. Tenemos que agradarle —continuó desarrollando su idea—. Será una especie de «justicia poética». Él mismo se da cuenta de las razones y no debemos malograrlo. —Por un momento les dio vueltas a todas las posibilidades, pero lo que éstas produjeron fue otro suave gemido—: El quid está en que no veo cómo *puede* agradarle Harold.

—En ese caso no le prestará dinero —dijo Brookenham.

Esta contingencia también la consideró ella:

—Me haces sentirme como si deseara que se lo prestase, lo cual es sumamente ignominioso. Y creo que en realidad tampoco le agrado *yo* —continuó.

—¡Ah! —exclamó una vez más su marido.

—Quiero decir que no le agrado *en realidad*. Él no tiene más remedio que intentar apreciarme. Pero dará lo mismo —comentó a continuación.

—¿Quieres decir que dará lo mismo que lo intente? —inquirió Brookenham.

—No: dará lo mismo que no lo logre. Se portará de la misma forma. —Lo vio todo con serenidad y penetración—: Por el recuerdo de mamá.

Su marido, asimismo, con su perfecta ecuanimidad, lo encaró de frente:

—¿Y también (por el recuerdo de tu madre) me apreciará *a mi*?

La señora Brookenham lo sopesó, y dijo:

—No, Edward. —Lo atalayó exhibiendo su más hermoso semblante—. No, a ti tampoco te apreciará en realidad. Pero dará lo mismo. —Esta vez lo hizo detenerse.

—¿Dará lo mismo si no le agradamos ni Harold ni tú ni yo? —Claramente, Brookenham sólo se sentía capaz de asimilar la premisa.

—Se mostrará lleno de consideración. ¡Será mérito de mamá! —exclamó la señora Brookenham—. Mamá, Edward —espetó con un destello de solemnidad—, mamá *era* maravillosa. Ha habido veces que he sentido que ella sigue aún con nosotros, pero el señor Longdon vuelve vivida esa sensación. Esté ella

conmigo o no, en todo caso sí está *con él*, conque cuando él está conmigo, ya sabes…

—…¿viene a ser lo mismo? —preguntó inteligentemente su marido—. Entiendo. Y ¿cuándo fue la última vez que él estuvo contigo?

—No ha vuelto a estar conmigo desde la noche en que cenó aquí… pero eso fue sólo hace una semana. Pronto volverá: lo sé gracias a Van.

—Y ¿qué sabe Van?

—Huy, toda clase de cosas. Le ha tomado un cariño enorme.

—¿El anciano… a Van?

—Van al señor Longdon. Y también viceversa. El señor Longdon ha sido sumamente considerado con él.

Brookenham seguía moviéndose de acá para allá:

—Pues si Van le agrada y *nosotros* no, ¿de qué nos sirve eso?

—Lo comprenderías muy pronto si percibieras la devoción de Van.

—¡Oh, querida, vaya cosas esperas que perciba! —se quejó con ironía Edward Brookenham.

—Bah, da igual. Pero él es tan devoto de mí como el señor Longdon lo es de mamá.

Esta declaración produjo por parte de Brookenham una inhabitual visión de la comedia de las cosas:

—¡Toda begonia tiene su jardinero! —Pero quizá (lo cual resultó bastante notable) hubo todavía más imaginación en sus inmediatas palabras—: Y ¿qué tal anda de patrimonio?

—¿El señor Longdon? Oh, muy bien. Mamá no habría salido perdiendo. Y no es que a ella eso le importase. Nanda *debe* agradarle —concluyó la señora Brookenham.

Su compañero semejó estudiar la idea y luego asimilarla:

—Primero el señor Longdon tendrá que verla.

—¡Oh, ya lo creo que la verá! —aseveró la señora Brookenham—. De todos modos ya iba siendo hora de que Nanda asistiera a las tertulias.

—Ya era hora, bien lo sabes, en *mi* opinión, desde hace un año.

—Sí, sé bien tu opinión. Pero no era hora.

Ella había hablado con determinación, pero él pareció huraño a darle la razón:

—Tú misma reconocías que ya estaba preparada.

—*Ella* ya estaba preparada, sí. Pero yo no. Ahora sí lo estoy —proclamó la señora Brookenham, con un tenue énfasis en el adverbio, mientras giraba la cabeza para atender a la apertura de la puerta y la aparición del mayordomo, cuyo anuncio («Lord Petherton y el señor Mitchett») inmediatamente habría podido parecerle a un observador el motivo de que en ella se hubiera verificado un cambio.

VII

Lord Petherton, hombre de treinta y cinco años, cuyas robustas aunque simétricas proporciones conferían a su chaqueta cruzada de color azul oscuro una apariencia de tirantez que casi ponía en entredicho a su sastre, tenía como primordial rasgo facial una cierta brutalidad agradable, mitad consecuencia de una hermosa exhibición audaz de dientes carnívoros, mitad consecuencia de una conformación de la nariz que sugería que dicho apéndice había pagado su pequeño tributo, en el ardor de la juventud, por algún enfrentamiento admirado en su momento e incluso públicamente conmemorado. Habría sido feo, según daba a entender sustancialmente, de no haber sido feliz; habría sido peligroso de no haber venido garantizado. Sin duda muchas cosas le prestaban este último servicio, pero ninguna tanto como el delicioso sonido de su voz, la voz, por así decirlo, de otro hombre, una naturaleza amansada, hiperdomesticada, adaptada a las perpetuas «chanzas» que lo conservaban sonriente de una manera que habría sido un error, e incluso una imposibilidad, de haber sido realmente perspicaz. Su brillante campechanía era la de un joven príncipe cuya confianza nunca se hubiese visto en la necesidad de dudar, y lo único que hasta cierto punto restringía esta semejanza era la pareja campechanía que él suscitaba en sus súbditos.

El señor Mitchett tenía tan escasa apariencia intrínseca que un observador se habría sentido agradecido, por constituir una ayuda para el recuerdo, a la inhabitual protuberancia de sus ojos incoloros y a la gran atención atraída por un mentón tan exageradamente hundido que era casi imposible localizarlo. Ataviado, por otra parte, no como en Londres se atavían los caballeros para presentarle sus respetos a la belleza, despertaba, mediante una exhibición de ropas que no tenían entre sí nada en común excepto la violencia e independencia de criterio, la sospecha de que en una desesperación de humildad deseaba proclamar que había mandado a paseo cualquier esfuerzo por parecer agraciado. De pies a cabeza llevaba escrito que había juzgado su propio caso de una vez por todas y que como su carácter, superficialmente propenso a la jovialidad, lo privaba del recurso a la taciturnidad y la melancolía, al menos podría contar con producir un efecto cómico si se dedicaba a ello con determinación. En consecuencia había comicidad en la forma de su sombrero hongo y el color de su camisa de lunares, en la sistemática discrepancia, sobre todo, entre su abrigo, su chaleco y sus pantalones. Tan sólo tratando con él durante un prolongado periodo de tiempo era posible descubrir que sus diversos modos ingeniosos de admitir su propio adocenamiento lo volvían secretamente insólito.

—Y ¿dónde está la muchacha esta vez? —le preguntó a su anfitriona tan pronto como se hubo sentado junto a ella.

—¿Por qué dices «esta vez» como si fuese diferente de cualquier otra vez? —repuso ella, mientras le servía el té.

—Únicamente porque, conforme transcurren los meses y los años, resulta cada vez más intrigante, siempre que no la veo, especular sobre dónde se ha metido… o sobre dónde la has metido. Lo que ello implica, me huelo —prosiguió el señor Mitchett—, es que no se toma molestias por verme.

—Mi querido Mitchy —dijo la señora Brookenham—, ¿qué sabes *tú* sobre «molestias»… sean las de la pobre Nanda, las mías o las de cualquier otro? Nunca has tenido que tomarte ninguna en toda tu vida, eres el niño mimado de la fortuna y vuelas por encima de las cosas sólo rozándolas ligeramente, de un modo que a menudo parece hacerte suponer que todos los demás también poseen alas. La mayor parte del resto de la gente está embarrancada en su fango natal.

—Fango, señora Brook… ¡fango, fango! —exclamó él en son de protesta al tiempo que, mientras observaba a su compañero de visita retirarse a cierta distancia junto con el anfitrión, le echaba un vistazo a la habitación, contemplando como tantas otras veces el escritorio Luis XVI, que cerrado tenía mejor aspecto que abierto y al cual siempre dirigía una picara mirada—. ¡Un fango notablemente cautivador!

—Bueno, así es como realmente parece ser considerado, hoy día, ese elemento en su mayor parte; y precisamente, por poner un ejemplo, querido Mitchy, esas dos novelas francesas que tuviste la bondad de prestarme y que… ¡de veras, me parece que esta vez te has pasado de la raya! —Hizo un ademán de caerse redonda, que pretendía ser un hondo reproche e ilustraba la impresión que le habían causado las novelas, renunciando a toda expresión salvo la de poner los ojos en blanco.

—Caray, ¿eran especialmente nauseabundas? —Mitchy se había quedado sinceramente sorprendido—. A mí me gustó bastante la que tiene la cubierta rosada… ¿cuál era el título de la maldita obra?; me pareció que poseía una especie de no sé qué. —Lanzó una mirada en derredor como si esperara encontrarse con algún atisbo del olvidado título, y ella retomó la cuestión cuando él ya la había aparcado distraída y bienhumoradamente:

—¿Una especie de malsana modernidad? Precisamente es *eso* —reconoció oscuramente.

—¿Así lo llaman? Un nombre endiabladamente apropiado. ¡Seguro que lo has aprendido del querido Van! —declaró él jocosamente.

—Probablemente. Las cosas buenas las aprendo de él y las malas de ti. Pero no has de inferir —continuó la señora Brookenham— que he estado comentando con él tu horrible libro.

—¡Arrea! —protestó el señor Mitchett—; yo te he visto con libros prestados por Vanderbank que, si *has* estado comentándolos con él…, ¡vaya —dijo riendo—, me habría gustado estar presente!

—Tú nunca me has visto con ninguna obra comparable a las que te gastas tú; ¡no, no, jamás, jamás! —Se mostró irrefutablemente convencida—. Por el contrario, él me hace las más encarecidas advertencias, presenta excusas, anticipadamente, por obras que… vaya, a fin de cuentas no han matado a servidora.

—¿Y que quizá incluso, después de tanta prevención, han decepcionado un poco a servidora?

La señora Brookenham hizo caso omiso de este chiste; se limitó a aferrarse a su alegato:

—Servidora ha tomado su antídoto y no es tan boba como para mostrarse poco receptiva ante cualquier nota artística nueva y genuina que alguien pueda hacer sonar. Pero en lo referente a una grosería abyecta, horripilante e irrescatable de principio a final…

—¿Conque las lees hasta el final? —interrumpió el señor Mitchett.

—Las leo para averiguar qué propósito puede haberte movido a prestarme semejantes libros, y porque mientras están en mis manos no están en las manos de otros. Te agradecería que en lo futuro recordaras que mis hijos se pasean por toda la casa y que Harold y Nanda meten las narices en todas partes.

—Prometo recordarlo —replicó el señor Mitchett— si le exiges otro tanto al querido Van.

—Ya lo creo que le exijo otro tanto al querido Van. Me veo en la necesidad de refrenar al querido Van con mucho mayor frecuencia de lo que logro refrenarte a ti. ¡Debo decir —insistió la señora Brookenham— que todos vosotros en general estáis empezando a necesitar lo que podría calificarse como una buena labor de edición! —Ella exhaló uno de sus grotescos suspiros polisémicos—. En cualquier caso he guardado bajo llave tus libros, y me gustaría que enviaras a alguien a recogerlos cuanto antes: tiemblo ante la posibilidad de que uno de estos días me ocurra algo y puedan hallarlos entre mis reliquias. ¡Unos preciosos restos literarios! —dijo riéndose.

También se mostró muy divertido el amigable Mitchy:

—¡Por Júpiter, en esos casos *son* halladas las más increíbles cosas! ¿No has oído hablar del viejo Randage y de lo que acaban de encontrar sus albaceas? Los más abominables…

—No he oído hablar de eso —interrumpió ella— ni me apetece; pero me das escalofríos, y te ruego que hagas que retiren de aquí tus ofrendas, pues no puedo ni pensar en confiárselas, para esa misión, a nadie de esta casa. Tal vez yo debería quemarlas a altas horas de la noche, pero incluso en ese caso me sentiría mortalmente amedrentada.

—Mandaré a mi recadero habitual a recogerlas —dijo Mitchy—; es una persona que reservo para estos cometidos, absolutamente avezada, como puedes imaginarte, y de una discreción… ¿cómo se dice?… *à toute épreuve*. ¡Sólo que debes permitirme decir que me hacen gracia tus terrores respecto de Harold! ¿Te figuras que se pasa el tiempo leyendo los himnos del Reverendo Watt?

La señora Brookenham vaciló, y nada, en general, le resultaba tan favorecedor como el acto de vacilar.

—Querido Mitchy, ¿sabes que tengo unas ganas locas de hablar contigo acerca de Harold?

—¿Acerca de sus lecturas, señora Brook? —repuso Mitchy, interesado—. Cuanto más perversa es una obra, déjame mencionarlo, más decididamente beneficiosa resulta para desarrollar el oído para el idioma e incrementar asombrosamente el vocabulario propio. Las obras perversas resultan más intrincadas… y eso hace mucho bien. Lo saben todos los jóvenes, los que están preparándose para algún examen.

Ella dirigió una breve mirada hacia Lord Petherton y su marido; luego, como si no hubiese oído lo que acababa de decir su interlocutor, superó el último escrúpulo:

—Querido Mitchy, ¿Harold te ha sacado dinero?

Él se quedó mirando fijamente con sus afables ojos saltones… y prorrumpió en carcajadas:

—¿Por qué diantres…? Pero ¿crees que yo te lo confesaría si fuese cierto?

—¿Es que no te ha pedido prestadas las más astronómicas sumas?

Mitchy se sintió enormemente divertido:

—¿Por qué iba a hacerlo? ¿Para qué fin, si me haces el favor?

—Ahí está el quid: ¿para qué fin? ¿Qué se dedica a hacer con tanto dinero? ¿En qué demonios lo emplea?

—Pues —sugirió Mitchy— estará ahorrando para abrir un negocio. Harold es irreprochable: no tiene ni un solo vicio. ¿Quién sabe, en esta época, lo que puede llegar a suceder? Él ve más lejos que cualquier joven que yo conozca. Déjalo ahorrar.

Ella apartó la mirada con su dulce hastío:

—Si no fueses un ángel sería un espanto hablar contigo. Pero insisto en enterarme. —Ahora insistió con sus disparatadamente patéticos ojos vueltos hacia él—: ¿Qué cantidades?

—Nunca, nunca lo averiguarás —contestó el señor Mitchett con extravagante firmeza—. Harold es una de mis grandes distracciones… lo cierto es que tengo bastante pocas; y si me privas de él serás una bellaca. Hay sólo una o dos cosas que me hacen desear seguir viviendo, y una de ellas es presenciar lo lejos que puede ir Harold. Por favor, ponme un poco más de té.

—¿Lo juras solemnemente? —preguntó ella con intensidad mientras le servía. Después, sin aguardar su respuesta, espetó bastante desabridamente—: Al menos tendrás con nosotros, espero, la caridad de darte cuenta de la situación en que nos pondrías. ¡Piensa en Edward!

Ante esto, el señor Mitchett tuvo, por su parte, un instante de vacilación:

—¿Es que Edward imagina…?

—Mi querido amigo, Edward nunca ha «imaginado» nada en su vida. —Ella seguía con los ojos clavados en su interlocutor—. Por consiguiente, si ve una cosa, ¿te das cuenta?, es que esa cosa existe.

Por unos instantes Mitchy atalayó al mencionado sujeto mientras éste estaba sentado junto a su otro visitante, pero, fuera lo que fuese lo que el mencionado sujeto veía, lo que en ese preciso instante no veía era al acompañante de su esposa, acompañante en cuya mirada no reparó. Su rostro se limitó a permanecer orientado, cual una limpia jarra doméstica, un recipiente con la singular propiedad de no llenarse jamás por mucho que se lo utilizase, hacia el chorro conversacional de Lord Petherton.

—Pues entonces no lo dejes ocuparse de ello. Que este asunto sea exclusivamente entre tú yo —rogó el señor Mitchett—; contenlo, no le permitas interrogarme. —Semejó dar a entender, con esta simpática extravagancia, que Edward parecía peligroso, e insistió con rigurosa despreocupación—: Esto debe ser *nuestro* pequeño motivo de discordia.

Había diversas formas de encarar semejante tono, mas fue notablemente rauda la elección de la señora Brookenham:

—Creo que no acabo de entender qué clase de horrible chiste estás haciendo, pero seguro que si *hubieses* accedido a prestarle dinero a Harold te lo tomarías de otra forma, y de todos modos yo estaba resuelta a ventilar esta cuestión contigo.

—Ventilemos siempre toda cuestión: tal es mi propio parecer. Eres tú —dijo el señor Mitchett— quien en modo alguno se muestra siempre tan sincera conmigo como admito (¡oh, *eso* sí lo admito!) que ha debido costarte sacar a colación este problemilla de Harold. Hay un asunto, señora Brook, que rehúyes una y otra vez.

—¿Qué es lo que rehúyo yo alguna vez, Mitchy querido? —preguntó la señora Brook con gran ternura.

—Córcholis, siempre que pregunto por tu hija mayor te escabulles como un cervatillo asustado. ¿Acaso alguna vez, en tales ocasiones, has dicho: «Mi querido Mitchy, llamaré para que la hagan bajar y podrás enterarte por ti mismo»? ¿Ha habido alguna vez que se te haya ocurrido decir algo así?

—Entiendo —musitó la señora Brookenham—; piensas que estoy inmolándola. Eres más gracioso que todos los demás del grupo, y desde luego tengo un encantador círculo de amistades. Hace un rato la duquesa me ha hecho saber lo mismo de un modo por demás vehemente, y puesto que va a volver enseguida, tendrás oportunidad de aunar tus fuerzas con las de ella.

Mitchy semejó algo desorientado:

—¿Sobre la cuestión de tu inmolación…?

—De mi inocente y desvalida y sin embargo al mismo tiempo, como consecuencia de mi hipocresía, horriblemente emponzoñada y corrompida hija. —Durante unos instantes ella se dedicó a contemplar el ligero desconcierto al cual, a consecuencia de estas palabras, no había sido inmune ni siquiera una

inteligencia tan operante como la del señor Mitchett; después, con un rápido ademán de la cabeza hacia la otra punta de la habitación, hizo la más rápida de las transiciones imaginables—: ¿Qué *hay* entre ella y él?

Mitchy contempló despistado a los otros dos:

—¿Entre Edward y la muchacha?

—No digas sandeces. Entre Petherton y Jane.

Mitchy no pudo menos que quedarse mirando fijamente, y en momentos así la radiante luz mañanera de su atención suponía una auténtica redención de su fealdad personal:

—¿Que qué «hay»? ¿Es que hay algo?

—¡Es realmente preciosa —suspiró apreciativamente la señora Brookenham— tu relación con él! No estás dispuesto a comprometerlo.

—Sería más hermoso por mi parte —dijo riendo Mitchy— no querer comprometerla *a ella*.

—¡Oh, a Jane! —se le escapó a la señora Brookenham—. ¿*Es* cierto que él está prendado de ella? —insistió—. Tú debes saberlo.

—Ah, es precisamente mi sapiencia lo que confiere lustre a mi lealtad, a mi delicadeza. —Él también sabía dar saltos imprevistos—: ¿Nunca, nunca voy a poder ver a la muchacha?

Esta pregunta pareció únicamente reafirmar a su compañera en su admiración de lo que había de conmovedor en él:

—Eres la criatura más delicada que conozco, y ello asoma inopinadamente, de la más insólita de las maneras, por entre los resquicios de tu depravación. La mitad del tiempo tu charla es intolerable; te saltas cualquier consideración de edad, sexo o condición; nadie sabe qué podrá ser lo siguiente que digas o hagas; y servidora ha de devolver tus libros (*c'est tout dire*) bajo el amparo de la oscuridad. Y sin embargo en el centro de todo esto, y en las profundidades de tu ser, hay una pequeña finura soterrada y querible, una dulce sensibilidad, ante la cual una misma, por muy perpetuamente escandalizada que la hagas sentirse, tiene que contener la respiración y detener la mano por miedo de perturbarla o magullarla. No hay nadie con quien, durante la charla —insistió balsámicamente—, me sienta ni la mitad de frecuentemente movida a callarme bruscamente. Eres mucho más vulnerable (aun cuando finjas no serlo: quiero decir espiritualmente hablando, ¿comprendes?) que incluso yo misma, y yo lo soy tanto que me habría gustado ser tan dura como la quijada de Caín. Jamás me ahorras una sola zozobra… no, jamás lo haces; no es ésa la forma que adopta tu delicadeza. ¡Pero te darás cuenta de a qué me refiero, así y todo, me parece, si te digo que hay cantidad de zozobras que yo te ahorro *a ti*!

Resueltamente el señor Mitchett se encendió con la sinceridad de su propia atención:

—¿Que me daré cuenta de a qué te refieres, queridísima amiga? Un hombre profundamente impedido, un hombre de mis orígenes, de mi aspecto, de mis flaquezas y fiascos globales, de mi inmensa deuda, de cabo a rabo, por la ventaja, llamémosla así, que noto que mis amigos han tenido la bondad de concederme: un hombre así, ¿cómo puede no ser consciente a cada instante de que todos alrededor de él caminan de puntillas y se intercambian guiños? ¿Qué *podéis* los del grupo mencionar en mi presencia, pobres criaturas, que no resulte una alusión personal?

Por un instante la mirada de la señora Brookenham lo envolvió como la de ninguna Virgen pintada ha envuelto jamás al pequeñuelo sentado en su regazo:

—¡Y lo mejor de todo lo que hay en ti es tu precioso, precioso orgullo! Eres más orgulloso que todos nosotros juntos. —Ella impidió un gesto que aparentemente él había iniciado a guisa de protesta; con su humilde sabiduría, prosiguió—: No existe ningún hombre salvo *tú* a quien Petherton no habría vuelto ordinario. El mismo no es ordinario… por lo menos no exageradamente; pero es ni más ni menos que una de esas personas, una tipología que servidora conoce muy bien, que son hasta un grado terrible, en este país, la causa de que los demás sí lo sean. Por lo que se me alcanza, él es la causa de que yo lo sea… incluso la causa de que lo sea el pobre Edward. Pues es que soy ordinaria, Mitchy querido… con gran frecuencia; y lo asombroso de ti es que nunca lo eres.

—Muchas gracias por todo. ¡Muchas gracias, en especial, por eso de «asombroso»! —sonrió forzadamente Mitchy.

—¡Oh, sé lo que digo! —Ella no se sonrojó en lo más mínimo—. Voy a revelarte algo —prosiguió con idéntica seriedad— si prometes no contárselo absolutamente a nadie. Aunque tú seas orgulloso, yo no lo soy. ¡Ahí lo tienes! Ello es sumamente insólito, y procuro ocultarlo, incluso ante mí misma; pero no cabe la menor duda: no soy orgullosa *pour deux sous*. Y algún día, en alguna situación terrible, ello quedará al descubierto. Te lo digo tal como es. ¿Seguirás queriéndome entonces?

—Hasta las últimas consecuencias —contestó Mitchy, leal—. Pues una mujer de inteligencia tan sobrenatural, ¿cómo *puede*, cómo necesita, ser «orgullosa»? El orgullo sólo es de utilidad cuando se agota el

ingenio: es el tren que toma el ciclista cuando se le ha desinflado el neumático. Cuando tal cosa le ocurra a *tu* neumático, señora Brook, ven a contármelo. Y en este mismo instante me haces preguntarme —confesó— por qué estás tomando tan tremendas precauciones y apostando tal enjambre de soldados. Si lo que planeas es acabar conmigo, bastará con una única bala. —No vaciló sino un instante antes de completar su idea—: Adonde realmente quieres ir a parar es a que Nanda me aborrece y a que yo haría bien en no volver a preguntar por ella.

—¿Hablas en serio? —preguntó su compañera tras unos momentos—. Mitchy, ¿real y verdaderamente te gusta Nanda?

—Me gusta tanto como ello es factible: tanto como a un hombre puede gustarle una muchacha cuando, desde el primer instante en que la vio y la apreció, vio también, y lo vio junto a todos los motivos, que él mismo carece de cualquier posibilidad con ella. Por supuesto, venciendo las tentaciones, dicho hombre ha hecho todo lo posible para no dar libre rienda a sus sentimientos. Pero hay ocasiones —agregó pesaroso el señor Mitchett— en que lo aliviaría enormemente sentirse libre de manifestar lo que lleva dentro de sí.

—Creo —repuso su anfitriona— que exageras las dificultades que hay en tu camino. ¿A qué te refieres con eso de «todos los motivos»?

—Caramba, uno de ellos ya lo he mencionado. A Nanda le pongo la carne de gallina.

—¡Mi querido Mitchy! —gimió la señora Brookenham en son de protesta.

—El otro es que (con toda razón) está enamorada.

—¿De quién diantre?

La señora Brookenham, con su atónita mirada, encaró los ojos masculinos lo bastante prolongadamente para haber averiguado algo gracias a éstos antes de que él tomara a hablar:

—¿De veras que nunca lo has sospechado? ¿De quién va a ser sino del querido Van?

—¿Nanda está enamorada del querido Van? —A ella apenas le fue posible expresar el grado hasta el cual nunca lo había sospechado—. Caray, pero si él tiene el doble de edad: la conoció cuando ella llevaba un delantalito y se ensuciaba la cara y recibía un sopapo por esto último; jamás en la vida ha pensado en ella seriamente.

—¿Cómo puede una persona de tu agudeza, mi querida amiga —preguntó Mitchy—, afirmar que tales menudencias tengan el menor peso en este asunto? ¿Acaso es concebible que recibas en tu casa a un individuo tan admirable, tan deslumbrantemente apuesto, tan endiabladamente enterado en cuestiones de «cultura» y que los deja a todos en pañales en cualquier respecto, y esperar que en el seno de tu familia prevalezca esa ausencia de historia que caracteriza los mejores reinados? Si *tú* fueses una muchacha, ¿es que *tú* no te pondrías colorada? Si yo fuese una muchacha, ¿es que yo no me pondría también… a menos que, como es lo más probable, me pusiese verde de celos?

La señora Brookenham se sintió hondamente impresionada:

—¿Es que Nanda se pone colorada?…

—La tonalidad más preciosa que hayas visto jamás. Resulta muy ilógico que aún no hayas reparado en ello.

Fue característico de la cordialidad de la señora Brookenham el hecho de que, con su súbita conciencia de la importancia de esta nueva luz, se mostrara bien dispuesta a denigrarse a sí misma:

—Hay tantos elementos en la vida de una; una sigue husmillos falsos; una no lo discierne todo al primer golpe de vista. Si lo que dices es cierto debes ayudarme. Debemos velar por ella.

—Pero ¿de qué me servirá eso? —inquirió Mitchy.

—¿No te importa lo bastante para querer ayudarla *a ella*? —Entonces, antes de que él pudiese abrir la boca, su anfitriona exclamó con ternura—: ¡Mi pobrecita niña! ¿Qué piensa o sueña? ¡En verdad está haciendo méritos para ganar el cielo!

—¡Oh, él la aprecia! —dijo Mitchy—. De hecho la aprecia extremadamente.

—¿Quieres decir que él mismo te lo ha confesado?

—¡Oh no: nunca hablamos sobre eso! Pero él la aprecia —reiteró obcecadamente el señor Mitchett—. Y es un sentimiento enteramente sincero.

Durante un momento la señora Brookenham les dio vueltas a estas cosas; tras lo cual se manifestó de un modo que lo sorprendió visiblemente:

—Me da en la nariz que no te propones hacerle una jugarreta a Van, ¿verdad?… porque sé que a tu vez tú lo aprecias extremadamente. Eres tan maravilloso con tus amigos —¡oh, vaya si ella sabía expresarle que era consciente de ello!—, y de maneras tan diversas y exquisitas. Están los que, como *él* —se refería al otro visitante—, consiguen todo de ti y a los cuales de veras pareces apreciar, o por lo menos tolerar, precisamente *a causa* de ello. Y luego están los que no piden nada… y a los cuales aprecias a pesar de ello.

Mitchy se recostó, ante esto, escondiendo uno de sus puños dentro del otro, contemplándola con una cierta emotividad disimulada. Sonrió burlonamente de un modo casi excesivo como para tratarse de un hombre que se sintiese simplemente divertido:

—Ésa es la clase a que perteneces *tú*.

—Es la mejor —repuso ella—, y me cuido de permanecer dentro de ella. Pero tú procuras desplazamos, mediante sobornos, a la clase inferior, porque, con lo orgulloso que eres, te mortifica un poco apreciamos tanto. Pero no pensamos cambiamos de clase (al menos yo no pienso hacerlo). Tal vez sí logres que se cambie Van —continuó maravillosamente—. No hay nada que no estés dispuesto a hacer por él o a darle. —Mitchy la admiró desde su ubicación al tiempo que meneaba lentamente la cabeza—. Él es el hombre (sin fortuna y tal como es, hasta el más nimio pormenor) que te habría gustado ser, a quien envidias intensamente, y sin embargo eres lo bastante magnánimo para realizar casi cualquier sacrificio en su favor.

Verdaderamente el agradecimiento de Mitchy se había abismado en un sonrojo.

—¡Magnífica, magnífica señora Brook! ¿*Qué* estás tramando con tantas alharacas?

—Por consiguiente, como digo —prosiguió ella imperturbablemente—, no es para ponerle la zancadilla a Van por lo que ratificas lo que me has dicho hace un momento.

Durante unos instantes el señor Mitchett no ofreció ninguna señal excepto sus colores subidos y su insólita mirada ofendida.

—¿Cómo podría eso ponerle la zancadilla? —inquirió.

—Oh, *sería* una forma, ¿no te das cuenta?, de plantearme la necesidad de protegerme de él. Pues él puede «apreciar» a Nanda tanto como te plazca, pero aun así nunca, nunca —aseveró la señora Brookenham entrecortadamente—, nunca se portará como es debido. Y sentir esto como *yo* lo siento —explicó— sólo puede ser, ¿tampoco te das cuenta?, desear salvarla.

Por fin habríase dicho que el pobre Mitchy se daba cuenta:

—¿Atajándolo a tiempo? ¿Prohibiéndole a Van la entrada en esta casa?

Ella dio la impresión de moverse con unas pequeñas tijeras de podar en un jardín de alternativas:

—O mandándola fuera *a ella*. ¿Me ayudarás a salvarla? —espetó de nuevo tras un instante—. No es cierto —siguió— que ella sienta aversión alguna hacia ti.

—¿Es que la has acusado de eso? —demandó Mitchy con un valor que se aproximó a una elevada gallardía.

Ello inspiró, sobre la marcha, a su interlocutora; y su propia gallardía, ahora de una calidad tan excelente como su diplomacia, lo cual es decir mucho, rayó casi a la misma altura:

—Sí, mi querido amigo: abiertamente.

—Madre mía. Entonces ya sé lo que respondería ella.

—Lo negó tajantemente.

—Oh sí, es lo que siempre hacen, porque me compadecen —sonrió Mitchy—. Ella diría lo que todos dicen: que el efecto que produzco, aunque al principio resulte espeluznante, poco a poco consiguen acostumbrarse a él. El mundo está lleno de gente que termina acostumbrándose a mí —concluyó el señor Mitchett.

—¡Es lo que *yo* nunca conseguiré, pues eres extraordinariamente fascinador! —declaró la señora Brookenham—. Si en realidad no te he espoleado *más* en lo relativo a Nanda —siguió—, ha sido a causa de un escrúpulo de una clase que los del grupo nunca le hacéis a una mujer la justicia de atribuirle. Eres objeto de maquinaciones que más bien tienden a volverte desacostumbrado.

Ante esto, el señor Mitchett se incorporó de un salto; claramente tuvo conciencia de su propio nerviosismo; se apartó con inquietud unos cuantos pasos; luego, con las manos en los bolsillos, atalayó a su anfitriona con un semblante más controlado:

—¿Qué quiere decir la duquesa con eso de que tu hija está (tal como te entendí que reproducías sus palabras hace un rato) «emponzoñada y corrompida»?

La señora Brookenham se le arrimó —literalmente se puso en pie— sonriendo:

—Le vienes pintiparado. ¡Ya sabes que ella querría cazarte para la pequeña Aggie!

—¿Qué quiere decir la duquesa, qué quiere decir? —repitió Mitchy.

Mientras hablaba, la puerta se había abierto de par en par; la señora Brookenham volvió la mirada hacia ésta diciéndole:

—¡Ahora vas a tener la oportunidad de sonsacárselo a ella misma!

La duquesa había regresado y la pequeña Aggie venía en su estela.

VIII

Dicha jovencita, en este aspecto, ciertamente era una figura como para ofrecer fundamento a las más altas esperanzas. Tan leve y blanca, tan delicadamente preciosa, como una azucena recogida en un jardín, su admirable educación pareció hacerla ofrecerse a todos los presentes como sostenida por las yemas de unos cuidadosos dedos. En cualquier presentación se mostraba, empero, tan poco presumida que, tímida y sumisamente, esperando a recibir alguna indicación, se detuvo en el centro de la general amistosidad hasta que francamente la señora Brookenham, para darle la bienvenida, se convirtió también en una tímida jovencita y extendió una insegura mano con deslumbrada mirada candorosa que dudaba si aventurarse a saludar con un beso. «¡Caramba, mi querida, hermosa, extraña y "arisca" amiguita, llevabas siglos sin aparecer por aquí, pero es una alegría verte, y espero que te hayas traído tu muñeca!»: algo así habría podido ser el sentido del cordial murmullo de nuestra amiga mientras, mirándola de pies a cabeza con vivo placer, conducía a la singular criatura hasta un sofá. La pequeña Aggie presentaba, de pies a cabeza, un arreglo de su atavío perfectamente a tono con su edad, su tez, su enfatizada virginidad. Habríase dicho que había sido adecentada para esta visita por un racimo de monjas vejestorias, enclaustradas hijas de arcaicas instituciones y educadoras de productos similares, cuyo gusto, hereditariamente bueno, se hubiese vuelto, aislado del mundo y en la más deliciosa forma, lo bastante desusado para comunicarle a todo lo que tocaban un peculiar matiz de distinción. La duquesa se había traído junto con la muchacha un aire de seguridad sobreañadida cuyo origen, de inmediato, habría sido identificado por un observador: la asociación de esta pareja les resultaba notablemente beneficiosa a sus dos miembros. La más joven se contagiaba del refinamiento de la presencia de su tía cual una de esas figuras secundarias eficientemente introducidas en los retratos antiguos. Por otra parte, gracias a su sobrina la duquesa semejaba, con una favorecedora benignidad, adquirir la pompa de una especie de cargo oficial: el de institutriz hereditaria de los hijos de alguna Familia Real. La pequeña Aggie tenía una sonrisa tan suavemente esplendorosa como una aurora meridional, y los amigos de su parienta se miraron entre sí, de una guisa habitual en el salón de la señora Brookenham, en generosa comunicación de su impresión venturosa. El señor Mitchett no resultó, pese a ello, sino levemente distraído de su identificación de la oportunidad que la señora Brookenham acababa de señalarle:

—Mi querida duquesa —preguntó sin tardanza—, ¿le importaría aclararme una opinión que acabo de enterarme de que (con marcada originalidad) sostiene usted?

Irguiendo la cabeza, la duquesa contempló un instante a su princesita de marfil y dijo:

—Estoy siempre dispuesta, señor Mitchett, a defender mis opiniones; pero si es cuestión de ahondar mucho en las cosas que son tema de algunas de ellas, quizá sería preferible, si no le importa, escoger una ocasión y un lugar más propicios.

—Ninguna «ocasión», graciosa dama, a tenor de mi impaciencia —replicó el señor Mitchett—, podría ser más propicia que la presente… pero si tiene usted razones para desear un lugar más propicio, ¿qué tal si nos trasladáramos los dos solos, ahora mismo, a otra habitación?

Ante este requerimiento, Lord Petherton prorrumpió en inmediata guasa:

—¡Córcholis, menuda frescura la de este Mitchy!; ¿verdad que no se anda con rodeos, señora Brook? ¿Qué quieres hacer en otra habitación? —le exigió a su amigo—. Esto es excesivo, duquesa, ante las mismísimas narices de quienes…

Sin vacilaciones, la duquesa se prestó al humor de la situación:

—A ver, Petherton: de quienes… ¿qué? ¡Lo desafío a que complete la frase! —les sonrió a los demás.

—De quienes —dijo milord— se congratulan de que cuando no es debido a una casualidad por lo que te encuentras con ellos en algún sitio, tu primer impulso no es exactamente aferrarte a cualquier pretexto para marcharte a otro sitio distinto. Especialmente —siguió bromeando— en compañía de un hombre de tan

infame reputación como lo es Mitchy.

—¡Ah! —exclamó ante esto Edward Brookenham, mas sólo como si sintiera un sereno alivio.

—La propuesta de Mitchy no entraña ningún riesgo, puedo garantizarlo —comentó su esposa—, pues ocurre que estoy segura de que en verdad nada podría inducir a Jane a dejar aquí a Aggie cinco minutos entre nosotros sin quedarse ella misma para cuidar de que no nos conduzcamos de un modo indecoroso.

—Pues bien, si ya estamos a punto de llegar hasta ese extremo —volvió a hablar Lord Petherton—, ¿hasta dónde diantres *podríamos* llegar privados de tu vigilancia? Te advierto, duquesa —continuó alegremente—, que si te marchas de la habitación con Mitchy, enseguida voy a volverme peliagudo.

Durante este breve episodio, la duquesa no apartó la mirada de su sobrina, quien recompensó su atención con la dulzura de una transigente docilidad. El origen extranjero de la muchacha estaba tan delicada aunque inequívocamente inscrito en todos sus exquisitos rasgos que su aspecto muy bien habría podido representar el recatado desapego de una persona a quien le resultara desconocido el idioma de sus acompañantes. Después la duquesa echó una mirada en derredor a todos los del grupo:

—Sois todos gente muy extraña y no creo que sepáis de veras lo ridículos que resultáis. Aggie y yo somos humildes personas extranjeras; hay gran cantidad de cosas que no entendemos; pero no por ello nos asustamos fácilmente. ¿En qué aspecto, señor Mitchett —preguntó—, lo he herido en su susceptibilidad?

El señor Mitchett vaciló; por lo visto había tenido tiempo de recapacitar sobre su propio apremio:

—Ya veo lo que trama Petherton, y no estoy dispuesto, llevándomela a usted aparte en este preciso instante, a dejar a su sobrina expuesta a nada que pueda obligar inmediatamente a la señora Brook a sacarla de aquí como alma que lleva el diablo. Pero la próxima vez que yo la encuentre a usted un poco más a solas… vaya —exclamó riendo, aunque no con la más límpida resonancia—, todo lo que puedo decir es: «¡Vaya preparándose, querida duquesa!».

—Se trata de tu opinión, Jane —explicó plácidamente la señora Brookenham—, acerca de que Nanda se ve perjudicada (en el plano moral, ¿sabes?) por mi negligencia. Yo nunca diría nada sobre ti que no esté dispuesta a decir abiertamente *ante* ti; por consiguiente, ya que Mitchy nos ha salido con ésas, confieso haber apelado a él sobre la base de lo que, en su calidad de tan buen amigo, *él* opina de tu alegato.

—¿*Cuál* es en definitiva el alegato de Jane? —Edward Brookenham hizo esta pregunta como si estuviesen «atascados» durante una partida de naipes.

—Verdaderamente todos los del grupo —repuso la duquesa con espléndida frialdad— escogéis situaciones insólitas para debatir las más delicadas cuestiones. No cabe duda de que hay numerosos aspectos en los cuales diferimos. Ahora mismo todos estáis comportándoos de un modo inimaginable. *Je ne peux pour-tant pas la mettre à la porte, cette chérie* —a quien volvió a atalayar con ese jovial interés que parece esconder la vibración de esta secreta súplica: «¡No entiendas, hijita mía, no entiendas!».

La pequeña Aggie miró en derredor con una cortesía imparcial que, a guisa de símbolo de la imprecisa sensación colectiva de que ella estaba, a todos los efectos, en manos de personas que gozaban del pleno arbitrio de mancillarla o respetarla a voluntad, fue lo bastante conmovedora como para haber hecho brotar lágrimas de cualesquiera ojos. Quizá ello tuvo algo que ver con la inopinada emoción con que —utilizando ahora unas maneras asaz distintas— la señora Brookenham volvió a abrazarla e incluso con las palabras parejamente abruptas y enteramente magníficas que le dirigió:

—¡Entre tú y yo en confianza, querida mía, y como de amiga a amiga, estoy segura de que nunca se te pasará por la cabeza que aquí ocurra algo grave!… Lo que le conté al pobre Mitchy —siguió para la duquesa— es la horrible opinión que tienes sobre mi autorización a que Nanda se vaya con Tishy… y, de hecho, sobre la cuestión global de cualquier relación entre jóvenes incasadas y jóvenes casadas. El señor Mitchett siente el suficiente interés por nosotros, Jane, para legitimar que yo lo haga partícipe de nuestra confianza en medio de una de nuestras dificultades. Por otra parte somos conscientes de tu buena intención, y a estas alturas no necesito decirte qué peso le atribuimos a tu opinión en todos los aspectos. En resumidas cuentas, para nosotros *va* a ser una dificultad, *cara mia*, ¿no te das cuenta?, si de repente resolvemos, bajo el conjuro de tu influencia, que nuestra hija debe romper una amistad: para nosotros va a ser una dificultad exponerle el asunto a la propia Nanda de tal forma que no podrá menos que concebir alguna sospecha sobre qué mosca es la que nos ha picado súbitamente. Luego estará la aún más espinosa tarea de exponérselo a la pobre Tishy. Y sin embargo, si su casa *es* un lugar intolerable, ¿qué otra cosa puede hacer servidora? Carrie Donner acude allí con frecuencia, y Carrie Donner es un ser aparte; pero ¿cómo vamos a pedirle incluso a un corderito como Tishy que renuncie a su propia hermana?

La pregunta había sido lanzada con una agudeza argumentativa que por un instante la hizo tomar posesión del ambiente, y fue durante dicho instante, antes de que ningún miembro del grupo pudiera recobrarse, cuando el efecto de la señora Brookenham fue obliterado por el de la reaparición del

mayordomo.

—¡Diablos, querida, baja la voz! —Edward Brookenham había tenido el tiempo justo de pronunciar esta advertencia cuando una dama, presentándose en el abierto umbral, siguió inmediatamente al anuncio de su nombre: «¡La señora de Beach Donner!». Naturalmente la impresión fue engorrosa. Todos delataron esto levemente excepto la señora Brookenham, quien, más que los otros, semejó recibir la ayuda de una percatación de que, providencialmente, la visitante no había escuchado nada. Dicha visitante, una mujer joven de notable, de deslumbrante apariencia, quien, al modo de ciertas relucientes puertas y barandillas caseras, instantáneamente daba la sensación de que no debía de andar lejos un letrero que rezara «Recién pintada», se halló, con un desasosiego extrañamente en los antípodas de la notoria luminosidad de su cutis, en presencia de un grupo en el cual sin embargo inmediatamente saltaba a la vista que todos eran amigos suyos. Todos, para mostrar que ninguno había sido pillado en falta, dijeron alguna cosa extraordinariamente afable; de suerte que tras un instante la pobre señora Donner fue la única que, sentada muy próxima a su anfitriona, pareció en alguna medida estar en una posición falsa. Además esto era esencialmente culpa suya, por cuanto resultaba extrema la anomalía de haberse decidido, sin contar con medios de respaldarlo, por un «coloreado» que a efectos prácticos era una declaración de audacia. Irregularmente bella y dolorosamente tímida, estaba retocada, desde la frente hasta la barbilla, como una fotografía de clase media… la moraleja de lo cual era sencillamente que habría debido ora dejar más a la naturaleza, ora tomar más del arte. Prestamente la duquesa se acercó a su pariente con un bisbiseo apagado, un «¡Edward querido, por amor de Dios hazte cargo de Aggie!», y al cabo de unos segundos ya había formado para su propio disfrute en uno de los admirables «rincones» de la señora Brookenham un corrillo integrado por Lord Petherton y el señor Mitchett, el último de los cuales contempló a la señora Donner, desde el lado opuesto de la habitación, con admiración y compasión verbalizadas:

—No pasa nada, no pasa nada: ¡tan sólo tiene miedo de sí misma!

La duquesa la escudriñó cual desde un palco en el teatro, confortablemente acomodada, igual que en los viejos días operísticos de Nápoles, con un par de acompañantes:

—Sois la nación más interesante del mundo. Una nunca termina de acostumbrarse a vuestra repugnancia hacia la *nuance*. El sentido de lo adecuado, de la armonía entre las partes… ¿qué diantres estáis predestinados a hacer, que, para ser castigados sobradamente por anticipado, habéis sido privados de él desde vuestro mismísimo nacimiento? Mirad su vestidito negro, bastante bueno, pero no tan bueno como debería, y, revueltas con todo lo demás, mirad su tipología, su belleza, su timidez, su perversidad, su indecencia y su *impudeur*. Este país es el único donde una mujer llega a ser al mismo tiempo tan descarada y tan insegura. —El desagrado de la duquesa rebosó—: Si no sabe ser decorosa…

—…¿que al menos aprenda a ser indecorosa? Oh —respondió Mitchy—, la irritación de usted da fe mejor que cualquier otra cosa de nuestro peculiar genio o nuestra peculiar falta de él. Nuestra corrupción es intolerablemente chapucera… si es que puede hablarse de corrupción refiriéndonos a esa encantadora joven, que parece uno de esos cartelones a la última moda sólo que, en un sentido de «malsana modernidad», como diría la señora Brook, más extravagante y gracioso que ninguno que hasta ahora se haya intentado. Recuerdo —continuó— que recientemente la señora Brook me habló de ella calificándola de «desenfrenada». ¿Desenfrenada?… quia, si lo suyo es tan sólo sosería echada a perder. Una expresión como ésta es un indicio del estado de disciplina a que la señora Brook nos ha reducido a nosotros, los del resto del grupo.

—De todas formas, la disciplina de la señora Brook no impide que algunos de los del resto del grupo sean horribles —declaró la duquesa—. ¿Qué se proponía usted hace un momento, en el fondo, pidiéndome que hablara delante de Aggie sobre este asunto tan grave de los riesgos que corre Nanda? —Al siguiente instante, interrumpiéndose a sí misma antes de que pudiese contestar el señor Mitchett, preguntó—: ¿Qué diablos creéis que estará diciéndole Edward a mi hijita?

Brookenham se había acomodado, al lado de la muchacha, sobre un apartado canapé, mas juzgando a partir del semblante de ambos era imposible discernir si entre ellos había circulado alguna palabra. Las maneras de Aggie eran demasiado desarrolladas para dejar vislumbrarlo, y las de su anfitrión no lo suficiente.

—Oh, él es rematadamente cuidadoso —observó tranquilizadoramente Lord Petherton—. Si tú o yo o Mitchy decimos algo ofensivo, seguro que es sin darnos cuenta y sin ninguna intencionalidad especial. ¡Pero el querido Edward lo dice con intencionalidad absoluta…!

—…¿hasta el punto de que, en términos generales, no se atreve a decirlo? —preguntó la duquesa—. Es una bonita descripción de él, teniendo en cuenta que, globalmente, nunca habla. Por consiguiente, ¡cuál no será su intencionalidad!

—¡Edward es impenetrable, es magnífico! —dijo riendo el señor Mitchett—. No conozco un hombre de más profundo entendimiento, y es absolutamente inexpresivo tanto verbal como físicamente. Por regla de tres, si yo soy «horrible», como me llama usted —siguió—, es sólo porque, en todos los aspectos, soy tan brutalmente superficial. Así y todo, a veces ahondo en las cosas, e insisto en saber —espetó nuevamente— a qué se refería usted exactamente cuando le dijo a la señora Brook, respecto de Nanda, lo que ella me contó.

—¿«Insiste» usted, bobalicón? —La duquesa había virado levemente hacia la indulgencia—. Si me hace el favor, ¿qué clase de derecho tiene usted, en lo concerniente a este asunto, para hacer nada semejante?

Sólo por un momento el pobre Mitchy evidenció sentirse reprobado, e inquirió:

—¿Quiere decir que cuando una muchacha apreciada por un individuo lo aprecia a éste tan poco en correspondencia…?

—No quiero decir nada —repuso la duquesa— que pueda inducirlo a usted a suponerme lo bastante vulgar y odiosa como para intentar despojarlo de esperanzas en lo referente a una criatura sumamente atractiva y desdichada; y, por ahora, no entiendo (¡aunque estoy segura de que no tardaré en averiguarlo!) qué se propone nuestra amiga cotorreándole sobre estos problemas tan pronto como vuelvo la espalda. Petherton puede contarle a usted (me asombra que no se lo haya contado todavía) por qué la señora Grendon, aunque quizá no sea ella misma la rosa, está a todos los efectos, estos días, excesivamente cercana a la misma.

—¡Oh, Petherton nunca me cuenta nada! —La réplica de Mitchy fue enérgica e impacientada, pero evidentemente tan sincera como si no hubiera estado presente el sujeto aludido.

El sujeto aludido, mientras tanto, francamente agitándose en su asiento, alternativamente estirando las piernas y apoyando los codos sobre las rodillas, había estimado pequeño el beneficio que podía sacar de este coloquio. De hecho su estado de fastidio —si es que era fastidio— aguijó en él el sincero impulso de clarear, como tal vez lo habría considerado él mismo, la atmósfera. Señaló a la señora Donner con una llamativa ausencia de disimulo:

—Caramba, a lo que alude la duquesa es al necio agravio que esta mujer ha infligido a mi pobre hermana Fanny… seguro que ya estabas al tanto de eso. —Durante unos momentos milord hizo extrañamente vivida la índole del motivo de queja de su parienta, el algo cínico tratamiento del cual se volvió especialmente burlón a la luz de la actitud y la expresión, en ese instante, de la figura incriminada—: Mi cuñado mantiene relaciones demasiado íntimas con esta mujer. Pero es que siempre Cashmore ha sido un asno de tomo y lomo. Todo ello es bastante desagradable —agregó—, pues el asunto se halla justo en ese punto en que, de un día a otro, puede haber algo de lo cual se entere la gente. ¡Figuraos a un hombre —reflexionó con vigor mientras los tres escudriñaban con mayor detenimiento a la recibiente de las atenciones de la señora Brookenham—, figuraos a un hombre que se encuentra de sopetón ante una cosa así! Lo singular del caso es que esta mujer y mi hermana no parecen haberse enemistado. ¡Que me aspen si no continúan viéndose con frecuencia!

La duquesa, como a todo, le echó una sucinta ojeada a eso:

—Ah, ¿cómo pueden florecer confortablemente los aborrecimientos sin el cultivo de ese frecuente «verse» que sólo resulta propiciado por lo que aquí llamáis la íntima amistad? ¿Para qué se dan fiestas en Londres sino para que los enemigos puedan tratarse? Te aseguro que es inimaginable que el marido de una soberbia criatura como es tu hermana considere mejor satisfechas sus exigencias por un ser *comme cette petite*, que se parece a un enjugaplumas (a la idea que de él pueda tener una actriz) de pega para una panoplia teatral. Al mismo tiempo, si me permites decirlo, apenas me sorprende que la sabiduría de tu hermana haya sido de una índole capaz de cederle toda la ventaja a su adversaria. Es la mujer más hermosa de Inglaterra, pero su *esprit de conduite* no está a la par. ¡No se puede tener todo! —suspiró filosóficamente.

Lord Petherton convino bastante apaciblemente con la anterior asunción de su propio desapego:

—Si con eso quieres decir que es tonta del bote, estoy absolutamente dispuesto a sumarme a tu parecer. Ello es precisamente lo que me produce miedo. Sin embargo, ¿cómo podría yo con decencia decir concretamente —preguntó— de qué?

La duquesa continuaba posada sobre la cúspide de sus propias facultades críticas:

—¿De qué sino de uno de esos grotescos aireamientos públicos de trapos sucios que periódicamente se producen en Inglaterra? ¡No hace falta que «digas concretamente» nada! —exclamó riendo—. Si hay algo más notable que dichas ventilaciones, es la comodidad espiritual con que, una vez concluidas, tomáis a utilizar los artículos ventilados.

—Todo retrotrae, en este aspecto —insinuó Mitchy pedagógicamente—, a nuestra nacional, a nuestra fatídica carencia de estilo. Nunca podremos, querida duquesa, recibir bastantes lecciones, y en la actualidad probablemente no hay función más útil desempeñada entre nosotros que esa difusión de maneras más

elegantes a la cual tiene usted la bondad de contribuir.

Tuvo otra ocurrencia pero, antes de darla a luz, su compañero ya había espetado:

—¡Es todo un piropo, duquesa… y me siento obligado a decir que, para ser una mujer inteligente, te has puesto demasiado al descubierto! De todas maneras yo experimento una sensación de seguridad —continuó Lord Petherton— gracias a las buenas relaciones cada vez mejor cimentadas entre la pobre Fanny y la señora Brook. La señora Brook es rematadamente amable con ella y rematadamente inteligente, y Fanny acepta de ella intimaciones que no aceptaría de mí. ¿No sabéis que no hago más que decirle a la señora Brook: «No la pierdas de vista y háblale sin rodeos»? Fanny no tiene, palabra de honor, a nadie en el mundo excepto a mí.

—¡Y ya conocemos el alcance de *ese* recurso! —exclamó la duquesa con desparpajo.

—Es exactamente lo que dice Fanny: que *ella* ya lo conoce —asintió Petherton bienhumoradamente—. Dice que mi brutal hipocresía le da grima. Hay personas —siguió divagando placenteramente— que son generosísimas en consejos, pero en su mayor parte éstos son absurdas majaderías. Los consejos de la señora Brook no lo son, palabra de honor: ¡yo mismo he probado algunos!

—Hablas como si se tratase de alguna asquerosa vianda casera… ¡zumo de uvas! —dijo riéndose la duquesa—; pero es imposible conocer a nuestra querida amiga, cierto es, sin enterarse de que ha puesto, en beneficio de sus amistades, una pequeña consulta. Examina los síntomas, se acaricia la barbilla y receta…

—¡Y lo singular del caso es —exclamó Lord Petherton— que no cobra nada!

—No acepta ni una guinea en el momento de la consulta, pero todavía está por verse si un día no comenzaréis a recibir facturas —replicó la duquesa—. Naturalmente ya sabemos que los achaques en que está especializada son los de maridos y esposas.

—¡Pues entonces hoy parece ser el día de las esposas! —intervino el señor Mitchett en cuanto se apercibió, antes que los otros, de la ilustración que estaba a punto de recibir la imagen invocada por la duquesa.

—¡Lady Fanny Cashmore! —El mayordomo ya estaba otra vez en el ejercicio de sus funciones, y por lo visto el grupo (a excepción de la señora Donner, que permaneció sentada) percibió una vibración que lo hizo ponerse en pie de nuevo, y todavía más ágilmente que cuando la llegada de Aggie.

IX

—Vete junto a ella sin tardanza; sé simpático con ella: seguro que tienes cantidad de cosas que contarle. Usted quédese conmigo: tenemos que discutir nuestro asuntillo. —La duquesa le dirigió la última de estas órdenes al señor Mitchett mientras el compañero de ambos, obedeciendo la primera y afectado, al parecer, por el indisimulado tono de confianza que había suscitado un nuevo destello de la sonrisa burlona de Mitchy, recibía a la recién llegada en el centro de la habitación antes de que la señora Brookenham hubiese tenido tiempo de acercarse a ella. Sentándose de nuevo rápidamente, la duquesa contempló unos instantes el inexpresivo encontronazo de aquellos recios hermano y hermana; luego, mientras Mitchy volvía a hundirse en su asiento, reanudó la plática—: Ustedes no son, como raza, inteligentes, no son sutiles, no son cuerdos, pero son capaces de ofrecer un aspecto espléndido. *Vous avez parfois la grande beauté*.

A Mitchy le hizo mucha gracia:

—¿De veras cree usted que Petherton la tiene?

La duquesa no se indignó por aquello:

—Ambos hermanos tienen, tanto por fuera como por dentro, los mismos grandes elementos globales, sólo que orientados, en cada caso, hacia direcciones bien diferentes: una dirección más segura para él como hombre, y más triunfal para ella como… ¡lo que prefiera usted llamarla! ¿Qué *puede* hacer una mujer —meditó intensamente— con una belleza así…?

—…¿excepto acudir desesperadamente a consultar a la señora Brook —se ocupó Mitchy de completar la pregunta— sobre la mejor forma de emplearla? Pero mire —agregó de inmediato— lo perfectamente competente para aleccionarla que en este instante parece nuestra amiga. —La anfitriona se había acercado a Lady Fanny con una mano extendida aunque con una vehemencia salutatoria algo matizada por un dulce predominio del desconcierto así como por el hábito, sumamente perceptible en momentos así, de la lánguida pusilanimidad de los lirios. En términos generales nada habría podido ser menos toscamente rutinario que el tipo de acogida que en el salón de la señora Brookenham se le dispensó al peculiar elemento —el elemento de un esplendor físico desprovisto de irregularidades hasta el punto de volver superflua la discusión de cualquier otro elemento— contenido en la presencia de Lady Fanny. Era un lugar donde, en toda ocasión, ante objetos interesantes, los unánimes ocupantes, casi más preocupados por las impresiones ajenas que por cualquier otra cosa, eran propensos más bien a escudriñarse mutuamente con agudeza y disimulo antes que a concentrar sus miradas en el objeto en cuestión. En el caso de Lady Fanny, empero, el objeto en cuestión —y merced a la misma ley que había operado, aunque menos profundamente, cuando entró la pequeña Aggie— obliteró la habitual absorta intercomunicación en modo muy análogo al de una hermosa tigresa domada que a buen seguro tuviera la potestad de secuestrar toda atención. En la manera que la señora Brookenham tuvo de mirarla admirativamente hubo un desesperado abandono pesimista de la idea de poseer algo personal en común. Lady Fanny, magnificente, simple, estúpida, casi alcanzaba la estatura de su hermano, y exhibía una frente insuperablemente baja y un aire de sombría concentración suficientemente corregida por algo en sus gestos que denotaba una ausencia de cualquier propósito. Sus ojos azules eran densos a despecho de ser quizá dos pizcas demasiado claros, y la exuberancia de su cabellera morena, la disposición de cuyos masivos rizos era enteramente obra suya, posiblemente despedía un lustroso fulgor peyorado por la moda actual. Pero lo mejor de ella consistía en ser, con inconsciente heroísmo, insobornablemente ella misma; y la señora Brook y los íntimos de la señora Brook, ¿qué eran, a fin de cuentas, en su generosa entrega a la tarea de percibir, sino una feliz asociación conjurada para animarla a seguir siendo así? La duquesa se sintió movida a la más intensa admiración ante la grandiosa cordialidad sencilla con que Lady Fanny se acercó a la señora Donner, una operación en la cual fue difícil decidir si ella se lució más de lo que hacía un rato se luciera la señora Brook. La pobre señora Donner —que, a diferencia de la señora Brook, no era lo bastante sutil y, a diferencia de Lady Fanny,

tampoco era casi demasiado simple— fue la que hizo el peor papel. Dirigiéndose a Mitchy, inmediatamente la duquesa calificó como infinitamente característico que la anfitriona, en vez de dejar escabullirse a una de sus visitantes, las mantuviese juntas mediante alguna suave ingeniosidad y —mientras Lord Petherton, abandonando a su hermana, se reunía con Edward y Aggie en el ángulo opuesto— se sentase entre las dos como si, en prosecución de algún designio personal endiabladamente complejo, hubiera asido la mano de cada una. Naturalmente el señor Mitchett hizo justicia a todos o, al menos, tal como habría podido inferirse de la pregunta que hizo a renglón seguido, deseó no dejar de hacerlo—: Entonces la verdadera impresión de usted, ¿es que Lady Fanny tiene auténtica base…?

—…¿para sentir celos de esa repelente personita? Mi estimado Mitchett —siguió la duquesa tras un instante de reflexión—, si es usted tan temerario como para preguntarme en relación con cualquiera de estas cuestiones cuál es mi «verdadera» impresión, se habrá merecido cualquier respuesta que obtenga. —Aparentemente la penalización que se había ganado Mitchy era lo bastante grave para hacer que su compañera vacilara a la hora de infligírsela; lo cual le brindó a él ocasión de replicar que acaso la personita no fuese más repelente que cualquier otra, que en la misma había algo que a él más bien le agradaba, y que existían muchas maneras distintas en que podía hacerse interesante una mujer. Por consiguiente fue esta postrera ligereza lo que terminó por dejarlo inerme—: ¿Quiere decir que usted ha estado compartiendo la vida de Petherton tanto tiempo sin percatarse de que él está angustiadamente preocupado?

—Mi estimada duquesa —sonrió Mitchy—. ¡Petherton arrostra sus preocupaciones con tal impavidez! Son tantas que hace mucho que he dejado de contarlas; y en general me he inclinado a dejar pasar aquellas que no puedo ayudarlo a afrontar. *Usted* ha hecho, advierto —continuó—, un mejor uso de oportunidades acaso no tan buenas… un uso que en todo caso la habilita para ver más cosas que yo en el significado del enojo que él expresó hace un momento.

La duquesa resultaba admirable, en conversación, por su forma de hacer caso omiso de cualquier cosa no esencial para conservar su presente plausibilidad:

—Una mujer como Lady Fanny no puede tener «base» para nada: para ninguna indignación, quiero decir, ni para ninguna venganza mínimamente digna de ese nombre. En este caso concreto, sea como fuere, ha sacrificado su base de una manera tan irresponsable que, en calidad de esposa afrentada, no ha tenido el buen sentido necesario para asegurarse a sus espaldas una o dos pulgadas en que apoyarse. Ahora ya no puede hacer absolutamente nada.

—Entonces, ¿es usted del parecer…? —Mitchy, que poseía, al fin y al cabo, sus escrúpulos, se contuvo como ante la vista de un epíteto.

—Sí soy del parecer —dijo la duquesa—, y por muy precisos motivos. *Elle se les passe*… ¡son de campeonato sus pequeñas intrigas! Es todo un caso, la pobre. Y todo con… ¿cómo denominarlo?… con esa ausencia de torturantes remordimientos típica de una buena ama de casa que logra que cuadren las cuentas familiares. Ofrece la pinta (y por eso la adoran aquí cuando se dicen unos a otros: «¡Fíjate en ella!») de una santa inflamada de cólera; pero ni es una santa ni, para hacerle entera justicia, está inflamada de ninguna cólera. Sí tiene el suficiente seso para darse cuenta de que algún día podría serle de utilidad que su marido haya dado, también él, un paso en falso; y, secretamente, no se siente sino complacidísima de estar segura de con quién. Así y todo, debo decirle a usted —agregó la duquesa con un estilo aún más afilado— que nuestra amiguita Nanda es de la opinión (que creo está absolutamente dispuesta a defender) de que Lady Fanny se mueve bajo los efectos de una falsa impresión.

El pobre Mitchy se quedó mirando pasmado:

—Pero ¿qué pinta en todo esto nuestra amiguita Nanda?

—Bendita sea: ¿qué, en efecto? Si usted *hace* preguntas, sin embargo, debe apechugar, como digo, con las consecuencias. Hay veces que entre todos los del grupo me quedo patidifusa. Una de ellas fue cuando hará un mes se me ocurrió realizar alguna alusión al encantador ejemplo del refinado gusto del señor Cashmore que tenemos ahí ante nuestros ojos: ¡cuál no sería mi sorpresa ante el tono que la señora Brook adoptó para negar en nombre de esta mujercita mi chistosa acusación! Dijo que era un competo infundio que hubiera ocurrido nada; la señora Donner había logrado escapar incólume. Como máximo había estado en peligro un día o dos, pero sus familiares y amigos (las mayores influencias) se conchabaron para protegerla: el peligro estaba conjurado. Ahora Carrie estaba perfectamente segura. ¿Cree usted que tiene pinta de estarlo? —preguntó la duquesa.

Éste era un punto para examinar el cual Mitchy no dispuso de suficiente paz de espíritu:

—¿Debo entender que Nanda había sido la fuente de información de su madre?…

—¿En cuanto al grado exacto de intimidad que reinaba entre la pareja y en cuanto a la opinión que debía formarse la señora Brook? Exactamente: fue «la última corroboración antes de entrar en prensa».

«¡Nuestra propia corresponsal!». Su madre no hizo sino citarla.

El señor Mitchett estaba visiblemente asombrado:

—Pero ¿cómo podía Nanda estar al corriente…?

—…¿de nada en este asunto? ¿Cómo podía *no* estar al corriente de todo? Usted no ha perdido de vista, supongo, que esta mujer y la señora Grendon son hermanas. Lógicamente la situación de Carrie y los peligros de Carrie le están muy presentes a la extremadamente desocupada Tishy, que por añadidura está infelizmente casada, que no tiene hijos y en cuya casa, como puede usted imaginarse, impera todo un denso ambiente de partidismo. Conque, puesto que Nanda, por *su* parte, no tiene un interés más absorbente que su querida amiga Tishy, con quien se aloja en este momento y bajo cuyo techo trata perpetuamente a esta víctima de insidiosas calumnias…

—…¿ya puedo hacerme una idea de todo el problema, quiere usted decir? —Bajo la influencia de aquella sucinta descripción, el señor Mitchett ya había decidido su propia opinión—: Pero ocurre —dijo caballerosamente— que Nanda no es una crédula.

La duquesa guardó un breve silencio que habría podido ser un homenaje a la valentía de él; luego dijo:

—En efecto. Resulta que no concuerdo con ella en este caso; pero precisamente lo peor que he dicho jamás de ella es que hay cuestiones respecto de las cuales globalmente es imposible embaucarla. Y se me hace que al concluir así (sobre la base de mi pequeña anécdota), usted puede darse por más que contestado.

Mitchy le dio vueltas a aquello:

—¿Contestado?

—En el altercado que, hace un rato, quería usted entablar conmigo. A lo que aludí hablando con la madre de Nanda fue al peculiar tipo de aspectos e intereses que Nanda se ve forzada a considerar a causa de las notables amistades que la señora Brook le tolera. Eso es todo… y no digo más. Ahora juzgue usted por sí mismo.

La duquesa se había incorporado mientras hablaba, que es lo mismo que acababan de hacer la señora Donner y la señora Brookenham; y el señor Mitchett se puso en pie igualmente, reaccionando ante este último estímulo. La señora Donner se disponía a despedirse, y entre las tres mujeres relacionadas con tal circunstancia se produjo un intercambio de efusiones bastante curioso. Observando esto, de improviso el señor Mitchett se manifestó divertido:

—¡Por Júpiter, se dan besos… ella abraza a Lady Fanny! —Pero aún había de crecer su hilaridad—: ¡Y al mismo tiempo Lady Fanny, por Júpiter, abraza a la señora Brook!

—¡Oh, todo esto *me* sobrepasa! —exclamó la duquesa; y el pequeño gemido de su desconcertado cerebro poseyó casi la severidad de una protesta.

—No tiene por qué: todo es como debe ser. ¡La señora Brook ha actuado!

—¡Huy, no digo que ella no «actúe»! —profirió su interlocutora.

El semblante de la señora Donner exhibió, mientras ahora su propietaria cruzaba la habitación, algo que insinuaba los estragos de una lucha a muerte entre la elegancia artificial y la elegancia natural del mismo.

—Pues bien —dijo Mitchy con decisión mientras percibía aquello—, yo concuerdo con Nanda. —Y mientras le llegaba una ráfaga de irrisión procedente de la duquesa, musitó—: ¡Nada *ha* ocurrido!

La visitante, como para recompensarlo por una benevolencia que debía de haber intuido mucho más que escuchado desde lejos, se acercó a él con su desmañada audacia:

—El jueves voy a ir a casa de mi hermana, donde se halla Nanda Brookenham. ¿Quieres que le dé algún recado de tu parte?

El señor Mitchett se puso de un color que muy bien habría podido ser mimético, y preguntó:

—¿Cómo puedes siquiera soñar que ella espere recibir algún recado de mi parte?

—¡Oh —dijo la duquesa con una jovialidad que no disipó sino parcialmente su propia aspereza—, la señora Brook le habrá pedido a la señora Donner que le pregunte eso a usted!

Esta última dama, ante esto, posó unos extraños ojos sobre la que acababa de hablar, los cuales tal vez tuvieron algo que ver con un rápido arranque del ingenio de Mitchy:

—Dile de mi parte, por favor (si, como supongo, has venido aquí a preguntarle lo mismo a su madre), que la adoro todavía más por mantener contigo unas relaciones tan buenas que me permiten tratarte más asiduamente.

Confundida, la señora Donner se dio a la fuga con una risa nerviosa, dejando cara a cara al señor Mitchett y la duquesa. No habían intercambiado palabra las dos damas, y no obstante era como si quedara un vestigio de algo en la mirada de la más madura, mirada que, durante un silencioso instante, se desplazó desde la visitante que se retiraba, de quien se hizo formalmente cargo a la puerta Edward Brookenham, hacia Lady Fanny y su anfitriona, quienes, a despecho de los abrazos de despedida que acababan de darse,

habían vuelto a sentarse juntas mientras la señora Brook alzaba la vista en exaltada inteligencia.

—Es una casa muy divertida —dijo por último la duquesa—. Ella me hace una escena porque no traigo aquí a Aggie, y otra aún mayor por mi discretísima alusión a las razones de ello, de modo que me voy corriendo, compungida, a hacer lo que pueda, sin pérdida de tiempo, para reparar mi exceso de prudencia. Jadeante, reaparezco con mi sobrina… ¡y es a *esta* compañía a la que la someto!

Su compañero miró hacia la encantadora muchacha, a quien estaba hablando Lord Petherton con manifiesta gentileza y jovialidad: una asociación que patentemente suscitó el interés de Mitchy.

—En ese caso ¿*podemos* conocerla? —preguntó este último con un efecto grotesco—. ¿Puedo conocerla yo… ya que *él* puede?

Los ojos de la duquesa, vueltos hacia él, habían adquirido una distinta luz. Él se quedó incluso un poco boquiabierto ante la expresión de los mismos, que fue, en cierto modo, completada por el tono femenino:

—Vaya a charlar con ella, obstinado ser, y a él mándemelo de vuelta. —Un instante después, Lord Petherton había regresado junto a la duquesa; Brookenham había abandonado la habitación acompañando a la señora Donner; su esposa y Lady Fanny conversaban aún más íntimamente; y la joven Agnesina, aunque visiblemente un poco asustada ante el extraño continente de Mitchy, había comenzado, del modo que éste le había descrito a la señora Brook, a entregarse educadamente al proceso de ir acostumbrándose—. Escucha, tienes que ayudarme —le dijo la duquesa a Petherton—. Puedes hacerlo, perfectamente; y es el primer favor que te pido en mi vida.

—¡Vaya, vaya, vaya! —exclamó con soma su interlocutor.

—Tengo que cazar a Mitchy —prosiguió ella sin captar aquel peculiar matiz humorístico.

—¿A Mitchy también? —Él parecía desear que ella no dejara de captarlo.

—¡Qué basto eres! —se limitó a decir ella—. Hay veces que desespero de ti. Él es mejor que tú en todos los aspectos, y yo lo aprecio tanto que… vaya, él debe apreciarla a *ella*. Convéncelo de que la aprecia.

Lord Petherton le dio vueltas a aquello como a algo que le hubieran solicitado fácticamente:

—Desde luego me gustaría que la apreciase. ¡Veo posibilidades en ella! —completó, guasón.

—No me cabe duda de que se las ves. *Yo* las veo en Mitchett, y confío en que entenderás lo que te digo al declarar que apelo a ti.

—Apela *a él* directamente. Será mucho mejor —observó Lord Petherton lúcidamente.

Por un instante la duquesa exhibió su aire más orgulloso, lo cual la volvió, respecto de aquel asunto, excepcionalmente digna:

—Él no me aprecia a mí.

Su interlocutor la escudriñó con toda su brillante brutalidad:

—Oh, querida, puedo dejar caer una palabra en tu favor… ¡si *eso* es lo que quieres!

La duquesa le sostuvo la mirada, y de este modo, por un momento, se sondearon mutuamente.

—Eres tan abismalmente ordinario que muchas veces me pregunto… —Pero, como se abriera la puerta, ella se contuvo. Ello fue consecuencia de un rostro aparentemente dirigido hacia ella—: Silencio, que se acerca Edward.

Libro Tercero

EL SEÑOR LONGDON

X

Si Mitchy se presentó a la hora en punto fue con absoluta deliberación y esperando disfrutar —amén de la pequeña satisfacción que ello le brindaría— de diez minutos a solas con su anfitrión, con quien rara vez le sucedía verse a puerta cerrada. Experimentaba la sensación de tener un asunto especial que tratar: una sonda que arrojar o una tecla que pulsar; en resumidas cuentas su disposición anímica era diplomática y ansiosa. Pero sus esperanzas se desvanecieron nada más trasponer el umbral. Lo único que su precaución le había procurado había sido la compañía de un extraño, pues la persona en la habitación a quien lo anunció el criado no era el querido Van. Por otra parte estaba claro que este caballero tenía que ser el viejo… ¿cuál era su nombre?… el individuo que Vanderbank había insistido tantísimo en que él «debía conocer». Pero ¿es que iban a tomar juntos el té ahí solos? No: sin pérdida de tiempo el candidato a la amistad del señor Mitchett, cual si raudamente hubiera adivinado su aprensión, mencionó que enseguida se les uniría el anfitrión: éste acababa de regresar a toda prisa, temiendo ser impuntual, y se había apresurado a otra habitación para cambiarse.

—Por fortuna —dijo el hablador, que ofreció esta aclaración como si hubiese estado meditando sobre ello—, por fortuna todavía no han llegado las damas.

—Ah, ¿*va* a haber damas? —repuso con cordialidad el señor Mitchett.

Su compañero de visita, que era reservado y al parecer estaba nervioso, se puso a desplazarse de costado, balanceando unos lentes, sin dejar de dedicarles a varios objetos las miradas furtivas propias de un pajarillo.

—La señora de Edward Brookenham, creo —contestó.

—¡Ah! —El propio Mitchy, tan pronto como este comentario hubo salido de sus labios, sintió que incluso a un extraño podía sonarle como una señal, parecida a las que los partidarios de la señora de Edward Brookenham habían adquirido la costumbre de ofrecer constantemente, de que reconocía la intervención de la mano de esta dama en el asunto. En el semblante de su interlocutor, no obstante, había algo que extrañamente alentaba la franqueza: exhibía la cordialidad de un encuentro fortuito, no el escalofrío. Al mismo tiempo Mitchy advirtió que este amigo del querido Van nunca llegaría a comprenderlo a él… aunque esto era algo que a veces lo hacía apreciar a las personas tanto como otras lo hacía odiarlas. En realidad era cuando más las apreciaba cuando globalmente se sentía más tentado de desconcertarlas—. ¿Sólo la señora Brook? ¿Ninguna otra?

—¿La «señora Brook»? —hizo de eco su amigo; miró desconcertado un instante, como si verdaderamente no inteligiera la alusión; pero enseguida, para demostrar no ser estúpido (y de hecho lo que pareció demostrar fue ser encantador), sonrió con extravagante entendimiento—: ¿Así es como hay que llamarla?

Mitchy profirió la más amable de las carcajadas:

—Supongo que no, que en realidad yo no debería llamarla así.

—Oh, mi intención no era corregirlo —se apresuró a dejar claro su interlocutor—; lo que pretendía, por el contrario, era preguntar si también yo debía llamarla así.

Los grandes ojos saltones de Mitchy lo atalayaron atentamente:

—Pruebe a hacerlo.

—¿Ante *ella*?

—Ante todos.

—¿Ante su marido?

—¡Oh, ante Edward —exclamó Mitchy tomando a reírse—, desde luego!

—Y ¿a él debo llamarlo «Edward»?

—Cualquier cosa que haga estará bien —respondió Mitchy—, incluso aunque alguna vez resulte ser lo mismo que hago yo.

Como para mirarlo con una debida apreciación de esa frase, su compañero cesó de balancear los quevedos y se los colocó:

—Ustedes los del grupo tienen una forma muy campechana…

—¡Vaya si la *tenemos*! —Recogiendo sus palabras, Mitchy se mostró alegremente enfático. Ya había comenzado, empero, a percibir haber causado ese desconcierto que en este caso iba a ser un efecto feliz.

—El señor Vanderbank —comentó su víctima con tal vez una pizca adicional de reserva— me ha hablado mucho de usted. —Después, como para, con mayor educación, impedir que la conversación se centrara en ellos mismos, agregó—: Él conoce a muchísimas damas.

—Huy sí, pobre hombre, no puede evitarlo. Encuentra una dondequiera que posa la mirada.

El desconocido asimiló esto, pero pareció ponerlo ligeramente en duda:

—Vaya, eso es tranquilizador, teniendo en cuenta que en ocasiones me ha parecido que cada vez hay menos damas.

—¿Menos que antaño? Ya veo a qué se refiere —dijo Mitchy—. Pero si tal es su impresión, resulta sumamente interesante. —Resplandeció y sonrió y meditó—. No sé si creerlo.

—Bueno, ya comprobaremos si es cierta o no. —Su amigo parecía desear no mostrarse dogmático.

—¿Lo *comprobaremos*? —Mitchy volvió a considerar aquello en toda su alta sugestividad—. *Usted* lo comprobará… pero ¿cómo podría comprobarlo yo? —Entonces calló sonrojándose—. ¡Menuda estupidez estoy soltando… como si poder discernirlo fuese mera cuestión de edad!

Esta vez su compañero fue quien se entregó a la jocundidad:

—Yo mismo pienso que sí es cuestión de edad; si no, ¿de qué es cuestión?

—Caramba, es cuestión de la realidad presente, y de poseer buen gusto, y sobre todo de algo *qui ne court pas les rues*: haber llegado a tener cierta experiencia de lo que es una dama. —Súbitamente la aguda reflexión del joven pareció florecer hacia una visión de oportunidades que dejó de lado cualquier otro asunto—: Excuse que insista en su edad… pero ¿*ha* conocido usted muchísimas damas? —La pregunta presentaba tanto interés que, sin más, pasó a desarrollarla—: ¡Ah, lo maravilloso que es charlar con alguien capacitado para evaluar la concepción que uno se ha forjado de las mujeres realmente elegantes! ¡Ojalá yo lograra —continuó— que me hiciera usted el enorme favor de evaluar la mía!

Ante esto, su compañero de visita hizo, durante una pausa, un más visible esfuerzo por calarlo; e inquirió:

—¿Está seguro de haberse forjado una?

El señor Mitchett reflexionó brillantemente:

—No. Debe de ser precisamente por eso por lo que apelo a usted. Luego no puede ser para pedirle una corroboración, ¿verdad? —insistió—. Por consiguiente ha de ser para pedirle una de esas hermosas primeras visiones introductorias.

Otra vez su interlocutor empezó, meneando los lentes, a moverse por la habitación, como nítidamente apasionado por el tema. Pero fue como si su mismísimo apasionamiento lo volviera una pizca tímido:

—¿Es que actualmente ya no quedan mujeres cautivadoras?

—Oh sí, debe de haberlas a carradas. De hecho yo conozco a montones.

Esto tuvo el efecto de hacer detenerse al desconocido:

—¡Conque «montones», ¿eh?! Estamos aviados.

—En efecto —dijo Mitchy—, ¡como para encontrar a una «dama» entre millones de imitaciones! ¿Se ha asentado usted en Londres, meditando, según parece, sobre este estado de cosas (pues Vanderbank mencionó, creo, que usted se *ha* asentado), en persecución de una dama genuina?

—Huy —dijo riendo el tema del dato mencionado por Vanderbank—, me temo que, para mí, toda «persecución» se ha acabado.

—Caramba, pero si está usted en la edad —repuso Mitchy— de la más exquisita forma de seguimiento: la observación.

—Y sin embargo es una forma, creo advertir, para cultivar la cual no ha esperado usted a llegar a tener mi edad. —Esto fue seguido de un resuelto ademán negativo con la cabeza—: Yo no soy un observador. Soy un aborrecedor.

—Eso significa únicamente —aclaró Mitchy— que usted se dedica a observar sólo a aquellos a quienes aprecia… lo cual resulta más hermoso que prudente. Pero entre mis temores por una parte y mis anhelos por la otra —agregó con ligereza—, yo apenas sé en qué categoría ingresar. Debo estudiar el terreno. Mientras tanto, ¿el querido Van le *ha* hablado mucho de mí?

En vez de contestar de inmediato, el posible confidente del querido Van volvió a ponerse el *pince-nez* y preguntó:

—¿Así es como ustedes lo llaman a él?

—Creo que generalmente sí… por brevedad.

—¿Y también —el hablador se mostró indeciso— por estima?

Mitchy soltó una carcajada:

—¡Por veneración! Nuestras irrespetuosidades, creo, son todas afectuosas y, a alguien a quien no apreciásemos, por nada del mundo le concederíamos el honor de llamarlo, o llamarla, ¿sabe?…

Rápidamente su interrogador había asumido un aire de sí saber:

—…¿con un apodo cariñoso y chusco?

Se acrecentó la jovialidad de Mitchy:

—Esa discriminación es nuestro único modo de mostramos severos. Debe usted incorporarse a filas.

—Entonces ¿qué nombre van a ponerme a mí?

—¿Cuál podríamos ponerle? —Tras lo cual nuestro amigo reveló, ratificador—: Yo soy «Mitchy».

Su interlocutor exhibió un semblante ligeramente extraño:

—Me parece que ya soy demasiado viejo para someterme a esa práctica. Yo soy el señor Longdon —articuló casi ruborizándose.

—Absoluta y esencialmente: justo así es como lo veo yo. Desafío a cualquiera a concebirlo a usted —declaró Mitchy— bajo otro nombre, y en ese sentido usted resultará, entre nosotros, único.

El señor Longdon pareció aceptar con cierta preocupación tal perspectiva de aislamiento, pero dijo:

—Infiero de lo que usted dice (lo cierto es que lo he inferido de lo que dice el señor Vanderbank) que forman ustedes una especie de círculo sumamente compenetrado.

—Oh sí: no somos una asociación formal ni una sociedad secreta, y mucho menos una «banda terrorista» o una organización con algún fin determinado. Sencillamente somos una colección de afinidades naturales —aclaró Mitchy—; acaso nos reunimos principalmente en el salón de la señora Brook (aunque a veces también en el del querido Van, como ve usted, y a veces incluso en el mío), y en todo caso estamos gobernados dondequiera por la señora Brook, en nuestros misteriosos flujos y reflujos, casi del mismo modo como las mareas están gobernadas por la luna. Tal como digo —continuó Mitchy—, debe usted incorporársenos. Pero si Van se ha hecho cargo de usted —añadió— o usted se ha hecho cargo de él, ya se nos ha incorporado. No somos tan numerosos como me gustaría, y nos falta variedad; nos falta precisamente lo que estoy seguro de que aportará usted: una mirada nueva, una inteligencia distinta.

Por un instante el señor Longdon tuvo la pinta de un hombre que sabe muy bien lo que significa que le pidan firmar un contrato, y comentó:

—Mi amigo Vanderbank fanfarronea tan poco que más bien es gracias a las palabras de usted que a las de él por lo que saco la conclusión…

—…¿de que él es una gran figura entre nosotros? No sé qué le habrá contado él, o qué le habrá omitido; pero puede creerme cuando le digo (en confianza, entiéndame) que él es, con mucho, el mejor de nosotros. De hecho (si de verdad desea una opinión sincera) el querido Van —y Mitchy resplandeció aún más mientras hablaba— está hecho para una esfera nítidamente superior. Incluso me atrevería a decir que se desperdicia lastimosamente permaneciendo en nuestro nivel.

—Y ¿está usted segurísimo de no desperdiciarse usted también? —preguntó con una sonrisa el señor Longdon.

—Cielos, no: yo estoy en mi elemento. Mi elemento es arrastrarme ante Van. Usted no necesita más que mirarme, como ya debe de haberse dado cuenta, para ver que yo soy todas las cosas miserables que él no es. Pero usted ya lo conoce personalmente… ¡no hace falta que yo le diga nada! —exclamó Mitchy.

Como bajo la coerción de tanta confidencia, el señor Longdon había permanecido quieto durante más tiempo que hasta ahora, y el encantamiento perduró unos instantes tras de que Mitchy callara. Entonces nerviosamente, abruptamente el señor Longdon se dio la vuelta, y su amigo lo contempló deambular sin rumbo fijo.

—Nuestro anfitrión me ha hablado de usted en los más elogiosos términos —dijo el anciano mientras volvía—. En ellos no podría hallar usted nada reprochable.

Mitchy aceptó aquello de la forma más radiante:

—Del hecho de que se tome usted la molestia de recordar eso, deduzco lo mucho que lo complace y lo conmueve lo que acabo de decir sobre él. Así que usted y yo formamos una especie de círculo: somos una organización de dos socios, en cualquier caso, y no podemos evitarlo. Helo ahí; no hay más que hablar. —Le echó un vistazo al reloj sobre la chimenea—. Pero ¿por qué tarda tanto Van?

—Ustedes los caballeros se visten meticulosamente —dijo el señor Longdon.

Mitchy aprovechó esa explicación para salirse por la tangente:

—*Yo* me esfuerzo por tener una pinta cómica… pero ¿por qué habría de esforzarse el mismísimo Apolo?

El señor Longdon sopesó aquello:

—¿Usted lo considera Apolo?

—Su vera efigie. ¡Pregunte a cualquier mujer!

—Pero ¿es que *ellas* saben…?

—…¿la pinta que tenía Apolo? —Mitchy reflexionó—. Caramba, lo que ocurre es que precisamente el aspecto de Van les permite hacerse una idea, y así, ya ve usted, disponen de un término de comparación. ¿No es eso lo que se llama un círculo vicioso? Pues yo participo un poco de este vicio femenino.

El señor Longdon, que una vez más se había detenido, una vez más se puso a desplazarse de costado. Luego habló desde el otro lado de la extensión de una mesa cubierta de libros para los cuales no había espacio en los anaqueles, cubierta de portafolios, vulgares carpetas guarnecidas de cuero, documentos límpidamente apilados. El sitio era una miscelánea, mas no un caos: un cuadro de admirable orden.

—Si usted y yo formamos una sociedad de dos miembros, permítame, aceptando tal idea, hacer algo que, de esta guisa, bajo el techo de un caballero y mientras disfrutamos de su hospitalidad, en circunstancias normales tal vez me parecería algo así como una traición.

—¡Vamos, dispare! —exclamó riendo Mitchy. Posiblemente ello estremeció a su interlocutor, que otra vez hizo una tregua tan larga que finalmente él ocupó su lugar—: ¿Por qué nuestro anfitrión no se casa, quiere usted preguntar?

Manifiestamente el señor Longdon se ruborizó en admisión:

—Es usted muy agudo; conque, teniendo en cuenta lo que nosotros tenemos a la vista…, ¿por qué nuestro anfitrión no se casa?

Visiblemente Mitchy continuó experimentando cierto regocijo, que habría podido ser, esta vez y pese a la coalición que él mismo había estatuido, a causa de lo que «ellos» tenían a la vista. Pero tras un instante espetó una contestación que claramente aspiraba a ser satisfactoria:

—Él cree no contar con los suficientes medios. Tiene ideas muy elevadas sobre lo que debe ofrecérsele a una mujer.

Los ojos del señor Longdon escudriñaron unos instantes las comodidades que lo rodeaban:

—¿Él no se valora a sí mismo…?

—…¿lo necesario para considerarse bastante tal como actualmente es? No —dijo Mitchy—, creo que no tiene una opinión muy exaltada de sí mismo tal como actualmente es. Y ya que *estamos* quemando este incienso bajo las narices de Van —agregó—, asimismo mi impresión es que no tiene dinero ahorrado. En Londres las mujeres salen muy caras.

El señor Longdon guardó silencio unos instantes; luego dijo:

—Son muy ambiciosas, sospecho.

—Oh, tremendamente. Lo quieren todo. Me refiero a la clase de mujeres con quienes él se codea. Un hombre modesto (y además pobre) no se siente tan obligado. Le cuento todo esto, en cualquier caso, como la opinión que él tiene. Hay cantidad de mujeres que estarían dispuestas (y con la mayor felicidad) a «amarlo por lo que él es»; pero las cosas no son tan simples, y éstas no son necesariamente las mujeres más adecuadas, y de todas formas él no acaba de verlo claro. El resultado de todo lo cual es que se mantiene a la espera.

—¿A la espera de sentirse enamorado?

Mitchy vaciló:

—Bueno, estamos hablando de matrimonio. Por supuesto me dirá usted que existen mujeres adineradas. *Existen* —pareció meditar un instante—, ¡y bastante peliagudas!

Ante esto, los dos hombres intercambiaron una larga mirada.

—Él no debe hacer eso.

De nuevo Mitchy guardó silencio, pero al fin dijo:

—No lo hará.

También el señor Longdon guardó silencio, que enseguida interrumpió poniéndose bruscamente en movimiento a su peculiar modo:

—¡Desde luego que no!

Una vez más Mitchy estuvo un rato contemplándolo andar de acá para allá, mas ahora, familiarmente aunque con pronunciado énfasis, fue él mismo quien reanudó el coloquio:

—Escuche, señor Longdon. ¿En serio está haciéndose cargo de él?

Y sin embargo otra vez, ante el tono de esta pregunta, el anciano se sonrojó visiblemente. Fue como si su amigo hubiera hecho salir a la superficie una excitación interior, y el anciano se rió debido a la turbación:

—Ve usted las cosas con un desparpajo tal…

—Sí, y así es también como las expreso. Las veo, ya lo sé, con gran *raccourci*; pero, qué le vamos a hacer, es que el tiempo es breve, si bien por suerte usted y yo nos entendemos. Lo que ahora quiero es simplemente decir —y Mitchy habló con una sencillez y una seriedad que hasta el momento no había mostrado— que si en algún instante su interés en él llegase hasta el punto de desear hacer una u otra cosa (no importa cuál, ya sabe) *por* él…

Mientras él titubeaba, el señor Longdon pareció extrañado, mas utilizó un tono cortés:

—¿Y bien?

—Caramba —dijo el espoleado Mitchy—, pues que me permita, por Dios, meter baza.

Acaso el momentáneo desconcierto del señor Longdon no fuera, en parte, más que una natural consecuencia de la prudencia que lo caracterizaba:

—¿Meter baza?

—Quiero decir: permítame ayudar.

—¡Ah! —exhaló meditabundo el anciano sin sostenerle la mirada.

Mitchy, como si tuviera aún más que decir, lo escudriñó unos segundos; entonces se reprimió antes de haber empezado a plantear nada:

—Cuidado, que aquí viene Van.

Habiendo oído el movimiento de la puerta por la cual él mismo había entrado, se dio la vuelta; pero en un primer momento se abrió tan sólo para dar paso al criado de Vanderbank.

—¡La señorita Brookenham! —anunció el hombre; ante lo cual los dos caballeros de la habitación (audiblemente, casi virulentamente) prorrumpieron en compartida sorpresa.

XI

A despecho de cualquier cosa que los demás hubiesen dicho de ella, Nanda no era persona propensa a achicarse, pues, aun cuando se detuvo un instante al no encontrar en la habitación al individuo cuya invitación había aceptado, al instante siguiente se adelantó como si cualquiera de los caballeros que tenía ante ella sirviera para el caso. «¿Qué tal está, señor Mitchy? ¿Qué tal está, señor Longdon?». No hizo distinción alguna entre ellos, hablándole al más maduro, a quien jamás había visto, como si ya lo conociese desde hacía tiempo. Por lo demás, en el aire de este último personaje en esta coyuntura había poco que invitase a tanta confianza: el anciano parecía haber sido atacado, de la más extraña de las maneras, por un sobresalto de inmovilidad y, sin extender la mano para saludarla, se limitaba a mirar fijamente con rigidez y sin sonrisa. Un observador resuelto a analizar la escena habría podido figurarse que se sentía una pizca disgustado por las familiaridades de la muchacha o incluso, como singular efecto de la soltura de ésta, sumido en una aún más honda timidez. Empero dicha soltura, por su parte, no reparó en que se hubiera producido ninguna turbación sino que pareció acrecida por el hecho de que la muchacha se mostrara casi antinaturalmente seria; y por fin la susodicha soltura rebosó con el siguiente requerimiento:

—¿Pretenden decirme que Van no está? He venido aquí sin mamá: ella me ha dado permiso para venir sola para verlo a *él* —continuó, dirigiéndose más particularmente a Mitchy—. Pero no me ha dado permiso para hacer nada semejante para verlo a *usted*.

Aunque había un elemento de seriedad en Nanda y un elemento de perplejidad en su compañero más maduro, no hubo, por lo menos en superficie, nada en el señor Mitchett excepto su habitual abundancia de jovialidad:

—¿De veras te ha enviado así sola? —Entonces, mientras el rostro de la muchacha encaraba el suyo con una inequívoca confesión de que en efecto así era, él preguntó con inmenso regocijo—: ¿Será que se muestra tan espléndida con algún propósito determinado? ¿Cuál crees que es su intención? —Ahora la mirada de Nanda se había vuelto hacia el señor Longdon, a quien atalayó con su suave franqueza; lo cual movió a Mitchy a insistir y repetir su pregunta—: ¿A que es encantadora la señora Brook? ¿Cuál crees que es su intención?

Aquello era un salto hacia lo ignoto, un salto del cual permaneció inconsciente el visitante más maduro, quien se limitó a seguir contemplando a Nanda con la misma frialdad de asombro. Por el momento toda expresividad había cesado en el señor Longdon, mas enseguida principió a mostrar que su expresividad únicamente había quedado retardada. Así y todo, fue casi con solemnidad como extendió la mano:

—¿Qué tal estás, qué tal estás? ¡Encantado de conocerte!

Nanda estrechó su mano como si ya lo hubiese hecho antes, aun cuando habría podido ser precisamente su pinta de sentirse curiosa lo que sobreseyó cualquier pinta de sentirse divertida.

—Mamá tenía unas ganas locas de que yo lo conociese. Me ha dicho que le dé recuerdos de su parte —dijo. Después añadió de un modo extrañamente digresivo—: No he venido en nuestro carruaje, ni en un coche de alquiler o un ómnibus.

—¿Has venido en bicicleta? —inquirió Mitchy.

—No, caminando. —Ella continuaba hablando sin una sonrisa—. Mamá quiere que yo haga de todo.

—¡Incluso caminar! —exclamó Mitchy riéndose—. ¡Oh, desde luego debemos, en estos tiempos, caminar con paso firme! —En la aún mayor elevación de ánimo de este visitante, el ingenioso observador recientemente esbozado habría podido incluso detectar una ausencia de mera serenidad interior.

Ella no había advertido el efecto sobre él de la alusión a su madre y, perceptiblemente, tampoco prestó atención al comportamiento del señor Longdon o sus palabras. Lo que sí hizo —mientras los dos hombres, sin ofrecerle, ninguno de ellos, asiento, prácticamente se abismaban en sus intensificadas percepciones— fue prestarle atención a todo aquel domicilio, examinando los libros, los cuadros y otros objetos

significativos y especialmente la mesita puesta para el té, a la cual el criado que la había hecho pasar volvió ahora trayendo una hervidora humeante.

—¿A que es un domicilio encantador? ¿Va a venir alguien más? ¿Dónde *está* el señor Van? ¿Preparo el té? —Hubo un tenue temblor, indicio de un dominio de la situación quizá más anhelado que logrado, en la velocísima sucesión de estas exclamaciones femeninas. Mientras tanto el criado había colocado el agua caliente sobre un velón de plata y abandonado la habitación.

—¿Cree usted que habrá ocurrido algún percance? ¿No debería el criado… o sabe usted cuál es el cuarto de nuestro anfitrión? —El señor Longdon, dirigiéndose a Mitchy con preocupación, comenzó empero a patentizar, en un semblante menos perplejo, el retomo de su sentido de las relaciones de las cosas. Era como si le hubiera sucedido algo y se aprestara a transformar los indicios de ello en la apariencia de una mera inquietud por aquella infracción de la etiqueta.

—¡Oh —dijo Mitchy—, Van sólo está poniéndose guapo! —explicación ésta de la ausencia de su invitador que restó algo de efecto a la aparición del mismo en aquel preciso momento por la puerta más distante del punto donde los tres estaban situados juntos.

Vanderbank penetró con cordial premura y desde luego con cierto aspecto —reanimado, casi sonrosado, espléndidamente cepillado y raudamente abotonado— de salir, casi sin aliento, de placenteras abluciones y vivificaciones:

—¡Qué grosero soy por haberos hecho esperar! Es que vuelvo del trabajo hecho un asco. ¿Qué tal está usted? ¿Qué tal estás? ¿Qué tal estás? ¿Qué os ocurre que estáis todos ahí apelotonados como si estuvierais en una isleta del tráfico? Deseo que consideréis esto un refugio… ¡pero no de esa clase! —dijo riendo—. ¡Sentaos, por Dios; tumbaos; sed felices! ¡Naturalmente ya os habréis conocido todos… excepto que Mitchy es tan reservado! ¡El té, el té! —Y se acercó agitadamente a la mesa, donde, al instante siguiente, se declaró incompetente y desvalido—: Nanda, preciosa, ¿te importaría prepararlo *tú*? ¡Cuán amable por tu parte! ¿Te va todo bien? —Dicho esto, semejó percatarse, por primera vez, de la ausencia de alguien—: ¿Tu madre no viene? ¿Te ha dejado venir sola? ¡Cuán amable por su parte! —Nanda, despojándose de sus guantes, inmediatamente se había consagrado a valer a su anfitrión; ante lo cual este último, apartándose de la mesa y posando la mano sobre el hombro del señor Longdon para conducirlo hasta un sofá, continuó hablando, haciendo sonar una nota cuyo humorismo estuvo en la exageración de su frenesí—: ¡Cuán amable por vuestra parte haber venido, cuán extraordinariamente considerado! Espero que tu madre no esté enferma. Por favor, Mitchy, repantígate. ¡Túmbate, Mitchy, túmbate!: es la única manera de retenerte. —No esperó a oír un informe sobre la salud de la señora Brookenham, y habría parecido indudable (para nuestro agudo espectador, una vez más) que no encontraba nada de asombroso en la llegada de su hija sola.

—Sé hacer el té primorosamente —dijo esta última desde el otro lado de la mesa—. Esta mañana mamá me enseñó.

—¿Esta mañana? —Y Mitchy, quien, junto al fuego y todavía de pie, había declinado repantigarse, acogió con desopilante jolgorio ese simple dato—: ¡Mi querida señorita, sois una familia la mar de curiosa!

—Durante el desayuno me enseñó los pequeños trucos para hacerlo bien. Pensó que tal vez yo tendría que prepararlo aquí y me ordenó que me ofreciese a hacerlo —insistió la muchacha—. Yo nunca había tenido esta oportunidad en casa: normalmente tomo el té en el piso superior. Me lo traen en una taza, ya hecho y muy poco cargado, con un trozo de pan con mantequilla en el platito. Eso porque soy muy joven. Tampoco Tishy me deja nunca preparar el suyo; conque hay que recuperar el tiempo perdido. Eso es lo que me ha dicho mamá —siguió desarrollando su relato, y su juvenil taxatividad claramente tuvo algo que ver con cierto aspecto reconcentrado que apareció en el pálido semblante del señor Longdon—. Mamá no está enferma, pero ya ayer me había dicho que no iba a venir. Dijo que en realidad toda esta reunión es *por mí*. ¡Lo cierto es que espero que lo sea! —Con lo cual brilló en los ojos de ella, tenuemente pero quizá por ello más hermosamente, el primer destello de la alegría de una risa—. Dijo que tú comprenderías, señor Van… sobre la base de algo que le mencionaste a ella. Todo es para que yo conozca al señor Longdon sin que ella esté presente para, en su propia opinión, arruinarlo todo.

—¡Oh, mi querida niña, «arruinarlo todo»! —protestó Vanderbank mientras recibía de manos de ella una taza de té que pasarle a su amigo más maduro—. ¿Cuándo ha armiñado nada tu madre? Yo le mencioné que el señor Longdon deseaba conocerte, pero no dije nada sobre que el señor Longdon no echara de menos también al resto de la familia.

Del caballero mentado emanó un sonido de protesta un tanto informe, pero Nanda continuó desempeñando su cometido al tiempo que decía:

—Mamá me dijo que averiguase por qué el señor Longdon no ha vuelto a ir a visitarla. ¿Azúcar, señor Mitchy? ¿Es así como se pregunta? ¿Tres terrones? Igual que yo, sólo que muchas veces yo echo cinco. —

Mitchy había avanzado a por su té; ella se lo entregó; luego agregó con sus ojos dirigidos hacia los del señor Longdon, en los que fácilmente se fijó—: Mamá me pidió que le preguntase a usted todo tipo de cosas.

El anciano se había incorporado para asir la taza que le tendía Vanderbank, cuya mano, sin embargo, trató de hacerlo sentarse de nuevo. El señor Longdon, resistiéndose, se mantuvo de pie y emitió un gemido sordo que sólo su anfitrión estaba lo bastante próximo para escuchar. De repente esto semejó confirmar una impresión recibida por Vanderbank al tocarlo: una extraña sensación de que su invitado estaba tan nervioso que le temblaban todas las extremidades. Ello casi hizo asomar a sus propios labios una especie de exclamación («*¡Canastos!*»). Pero en ese momento el rostro del señor Longdon, todavía pálido, pero con una sonrisa que no fue enteramente dolorosa, pareció implorarle que hiciera caso omiso; y él era hombre que no requería nada más para llegar a una adivinación tan honda como rápida.

—Caramba, hemos estado desperdigados durante la Semana Santa, ¿no es verdad? —le dijo a Nanda—. El señor Longdon se fue al pueblo, tu madre y tu padre se dedicaron a tributar visitas, yo mismo salí de Londres, Mitchy estuvo en París y tú… ah sí, ya sé dónde estuviste tú.

—Todos lo sabemos: ¡ha habido tal bronca a ese respecto! —dijo Mitchy.

—Sí, me ha parecido enterarme de que la ha habido —repuso Nanda—. Se supone que es horroroso que yo me trate con Tishy, indescriptiblemente horroroso.

El señor Longdon, con la encubierta ayuda de Vanderbank, había comenzado a parecer haberse serenado, volviendo a hundirse en su sofá y prestándole alguna atención a su té. Habría podido ser con el propósito de demostrar estar tranquilo por lo que dirigió, al oír aquello, una benévola sonrisa a la muchacha:

—Pero ¿cuál es, hija mía, la objeción…?

Con gran seriedad ella desplazó su mirada desde él hasta Vanderbank y hasta Mitchy, y luego la hizo retroceder desde el segundo de estos dos hombres hasta el primero:

—¿Creéis que debo decírsela?

Ambos se rieron, y ambos parecieron dubitativos, pero Vanderbank fue quien primero habló:

—No creo, Nanda, que realmente la sepas.

—No: ¡en cuanto familia, sois la perfección misma! —espetó Mitchy. De nuevo junto al fuego, sosteniendo su taza, le dirigió su hilaridad al señor Longdon—: Le he contado a usted una barbaridad de cosas, ¿verdad? Pero no le he contado nada sobre esto.

El anciano conservó, aunque con cierto despiste, su actitud de cordial curiosidad:

—¿Sobre… er… la familia?

—Más bien —sonrió Mitchy— sobre las ramificaciones de la familia. Esta jovencita le profesa una enorme amistad a cierta persona… y, por decirlo de una vez, todo es muy complejo.

—Mi querida Nanda —dijo Vanderbank—, todo es muy sencillo. No te creas ni una palabra.

Él había hablado como aspirando a un grandioso optimismo alegre; pero en la muchacha claramente había algo que siempre se decantaría por la lucidez:

—¿Quieres decir acerca de Carrie Donner? Yo *no* me creo ni una palabra, y en cualquier caso me parece que los demás harían mejor en dedicarse a sus propios asuntos. A mí no me merecería una opinión muy elevada una persona capaz de dejar en la estacada a un amigo. —Se calló bruscamente, al parecer con la sensación de estar diciendo más de lo que pretendía, aunque, extrañamente, como por efecto de su tipología y de su voz, no había habido ni impertinencia ni acaloramiento en la declaración que acababa de hacer. Por mucho que ella pareciera curiosamente carente tanto de timidez como de ironía, a ciencia cierta no era una persona calculadora: era extraordinariamente espontánea. Ahora el señor Longdon la miró con una evidente entrega a su extremado interés, y muy bien había podido dejarlo atónito verla al mismo tiempo tan franca y empero con una fragilidad juvenil tan tierna y tan dulce.

—Bien dicho, bien dicho, mi querida señorita: ¡jamás, jamás dejes en la estacada a un amigo por nada que diga nadie! —Fue Mitchy quien tintineó con esta intensa sabiduría, cuyo efecto sobre el señor Longdon —a no ser que en realidad el efecto fuese de alguna otra cosa— fue hacer que dicho personaje, de un modo que ocasionó que los demás lo contemplaran con cierto suspense, súbitamente volviera a ponerse de pie, depositara cuidadosamente su taza de té sobre una mesa próxima y a renglón seguido, sin decir palabra, como si no hubiese nadie presente, echara a andar silenciosamente y desapareciera por la puerta que había quedado abierta con la aparición de Vanderbank. Dicha puerta daba a una segunda sala de estar, más pequeña, hasta dentro de la cual lo siguieron las miradas de sus compañeros.

—¿Qué es lo que sucede? —preguntó Nanda—. ¿Es que el señor Longdon se siente mal?

—*Es* una persona «desusada», mi querido Van —dijo Mitchy—; pero estabas en lo cierto: ¡tiene tal encanto, tal distinción! En resumidas cuentas es justo el tipo de cosa que nos falta.

—El tipo de cosa que nos «falta»… ¡ya lo creo! —exclamó Vanderbank riéndose—. Pero no es el tipo de cosa que se consigue con sólo pedirla: ¡es una cosa de una especie que podremos consideramos sumamente afortunados si logramos hacemos con ella!

Divertido, Mitchy se volvió hacia Nanda:

—Van ha inventado[12] al señor Longdon y, con la natural avaricia de todo inventor, no está dispuesto a dejárnoslo barato. Pues bien —siguió—, yo estoy dispuesto a pagar mi cuota del precio.

—La dificultad estriba en que el señor Longdon es demasiado bueno para nosotros —explicó Vanderbank.

—¡Miserable desagradecido —bramó su amigo—, es lo mismo que a él he estado diciéndole que eres *tú*! ¡Y ahora me recompensas intentando privarme…!

—El señor Van no es en absoluto demasiado bueno para *mí*, si es a eso a lo que usted se refiere —espetó Nanda. Había terminado de hacer el té y se había sentado en una silla con las manos enlazadas sobre el borde de la bandeja.

Vanderbank se limitó a sonreír en silencio a la muchacha, pero Mitchy sí recogió sus palabras:

—No hay nadie demasiado bueno para ti, por supuesto; sólo que tú no estás, ¿sabes?, *dentro* de nuestro círculo. Estás dentro del de la señora Grendon. Ya sé lo que vas a decirme: que ella no tiene ningún círculo, que ella no es más que una solitaria florecilla blanca dejada caer sobre el indiferente regazo del mundo. Pero tú eres el brotecito de tierna hierba que, añadido a ella, hace que inmediatamente ella «presida».

Nanda lo miró con su fría gentileza, y exclamó:

—¡Qué tonterías dice usted!

—Tu tono me resulta grato —repuso él— porque demuestra que *a mí* no me consideras, tampoco, demasiado bueno para ti. Nadie, recuérdalo, te aceptará eso como justificación cuando algún día el mundo me vea aniquilado porque hayas puesto fin a unas relaciones tan inofensivas como las nuestras.

La muchacha pareció quedar cautivada un momento ante la abismal humanidad sobre la cual la francamente fascinante fealdad de Mitchy funcionaba como la superficie de un remolino.

—¡Qué mártir! —exclamó ella con dulzura. Pero no acompañó de una sonrisa estas palabras. Se volvió hacia Vanderbank, quien, durante el minuto previo, había avanzado en dirección a la habitación contigua y luego, titubeando, obedeciendo a la delicadeza, había retrocedido algo nervioso—. ¿*Qué* es lo que sucede?

—Desdichado, ¿qué quieres de él? —retomó la palabra Mitchy puesto que durante un rato su anfitrión no articuló respuesta.

Vanderbank, cuyo hermoso rostro transparentó una idea sutil, miró una pizca distraídamente de uno a otra; pero fue a Nanda a quien le habló:

—¿Te agrada el señor Longdon, Nanda?

Ante tamaña pregunta ella manifestó sorpresa:

—¿Cómo puedo saberlo tan pronto?

—Él ya lo sabe.

Con los ojos fijos en ella, Mitchy se puso radiante para interpretar aquello:

—¡*Él* ya sabe que le han traspasado el corazón!

—Lo que sucede, como tú dices —espetó Vanderbank—, es una de las cosas más preciosas que he visto en mi vida. —La miró como con la esperanza de que ella lo entendiese—. ¡Es algo precioso, precioso, precioso!

—Exactamente —completó Mitchy—: ¡la víctima fulminada por una mirada de la diosa!

Inmóvil en su silla, Nanda atalayó a su otro amigo con nítida curiosidad:

—¿«Precioso»? ¿Por qué precioso?

Vanderbank, a punto de explicárselo, se contuvo:

—No quiero estropearlo. ¡Averigúalo por *él*! —Y, yendo a reunirse con el anciano, esta vez el joven sí salió de la habitación.

Mitchy y Nanda se miraron mutuamente.

—Pero ¿no es más bien terrible todo esto? —demandó Mitchy.

Ella se irguió sin contestar; lentamente se distanció de la mesa.

—Creo que ya sé si el señor Longdon me agrada —dijo.

—Es lo menos que puedes hacer —exclamó Mitchy— después de que probablemente el señor Longdon haya depositado a tus pies, visto en conjunto, el mayor de tus triunfos.

—Y también sé, me parece, señor Mitchy, que me agrada *usted*. —Ella habló sin concederle importancia a aquella hipérbole.

—¿Pese a mis torpes tentativas de mostrarme brillante? Es una gran alegría —prosiguió—, si lo que ha

suscitado esa confesión no es la mera tosquedad de mis adulaciones. —Ella se había alejado de él, con bastante gentileza, como si siempre fuese preciso dejar en el ambiente durante un rato las palabras de Mitchy; y examinó distraídamente los libros y grabados de Vanderbank—. ¿Por qué no ha venido tu madre? —inquirió entonces Mitchy.

Ante esto ella tomó a mirarlo, y preguntó:

—¿La menciona a fin de aludir a algo que usted adivina que ella debe de haberme dicho?

—¿Que siempre he supuesto que te pongo la carne de gallina? Sí —reconoció Mitchy—; ya veo que ella debe de haberte ordenado: «¡Sé simpática con él, para convencerlo de que su caso no es tan sumamente desesperado!». Así que eres simpática… así que siempre serás simpática. Pero yo te adoro, pese a ello, sin ilusiones.

Sobre una de las mesas ella había abierto, sin ninguna intención especial, un gran volumen que se puso a hojear. Y dijo:

—No «adore» a las muchachas, señor Mitchy: mejor ayúdelas. Resultará más útil.

—¿Ayudarte? —exclamó—. ¡Haces brotarme lágrimas de los ojos!

—¿Es que una muchacha no puede tener amigos? —insistió ella—. Nunca he oído nada tan tonto. —Sin darle, empero, oportunidad de replicar a sus palabras, ella hizo una rápida transición—: Mamá no ha venido porque ahora quiere, como dice ella misma, que yo participe más en la vida que ella lleva.

Mitchy ponderó aquello:

—Pero ¿es esto un modo de que ella participe en la que lleves tú?

—Ah, eso es asunto diferente… para hablar del cual debe usted dirigirse a *ella*. Ella no quiere, en lo sucesivo, que yo vea tan sólo a través de sus ojos. Está lanzándome al mundo.

Mitchy había atendido con el más vivo interés, pero acto seguido rompió en una carcajada:

—¡Menos mal, pues, que dentro del mundo estoy yo para recogerte!

Sin —por lo visto— haber concedido la menor atención a lo que contenían, cuidadosamente ella volvió a juntar las tapas de su infolio. En sus movimientos hubo deliberación:

—Siempre me alegrará que esté usted. Pero ¿adónde cree que han ido esos dos? —La mirada femenina estaba fija en la parte visible de la otra habitación, desde la cual no llegaba sonido de voces.

—Siguen ahí —dijo Mitchy—, pero limitándose a comunicarse con los ojos cosas inexpresables acerca de ti. La impresión es demasiado honda. Que se miren mutuamente cuanto quieran, y mientras tanto cuéntame si la señora Donner te dio mi recado.

—Ah sí, me transmitió alguna bobada.

—En tal caso la bobada debió de estar en el tono que ella le imprimió a mi absolutamente sincero mensaje. Todo lo que ella dice, lo admito, siempre suena así. Es su debilidad —continuó— y quizá incluso podríamos decir su peligro. Razón de más para que la ayudes, como creo que se supone que estás haciéndolo, ¿no? Espero que te parezca estar haciéndolo —agregó con toda seriedad.

Esta vez él había hablado con bastante gravedad, y con magnífica gravedad fue como le contestó Nanda:

—La *he* ayudado. Tishy está segura de que así es. Para eso es para lo que me quiere Tishy. Dice que para ella, sin duda, lo mejor es estar en compañía de una buena muchacha.

A raíz de esto el semblante del pobre Mitchy habría resultado llamativo, habría resultado decididamente conmovedor para otros ojos; mas los de Nanda no se apercibieron.

—Huy —repuso él tras un instante y sin asomo de guasa irreverente—, se me antoja que eso es lo mejor para cualquiera.

No obstante, tal vez Vanderbank sí había podido apercibirse de la expresión facial de Mitchy, pues ahora Vanderbank había reaparecido, sonriéndole a la pareja como sorprendido ante su intimidad:

—¡Qué bien *estáis* pasándooslo! —Luego, para Nanda, dijo persuasivamente—: ¿Te importaría reunirte con el señor Longdon ahí adentro? Deseo tanto que te conozca de verdad. Es para eso precisamente, bien lo sabes, para lo que ha venido.

Nanda semejó recelosa:

—¿Qué va a hacerme? ¿Algo tremendo?

—Va a explicarte lo que quise decir hace un instante.

—¡Oh —dijo Nanda—, si es una persona capaz de explicarme alguna vez lo que quieres decir…! —Dicho lo cual, ella salió rápidamente.

—Y ¿no puedo enterarme *yo*? —le preguntó Mitchy a su anfitrión mientras ambos la seguían con la mirada.

—Sí, pero sólo a través de mí. —Vanderbank había vuelto a empujarlo hacia un asiento y miraba alrededor en busca de cigarrillos—. Calla y fuma, que yo te contaré.

Con aire meditabundo, sentado en el sofá, Mitchy recibió lumbre y dijo:

—¿Sabrá ella comprender al señor Longdon? Ella lo tiene todo en el mundo excepto una cosa —agregó —. Que en realidad es sólo media cosa.

Frente a él, Vanderbank encendió su propio tabaco:

—Y ¿cuál es?

—Sentido del humor.

—Oh sí, es una muchacha seria.

Mitchy fumó unos instantes, y dijo:

—Es una muchacha trágica.

Junto al fuego, su amigo contempló un momento la vacía porción de la habitación contigua, después se acercó para darle a la puerta un suave tirón que la dejó casi cerrada.

—Es extraño —dijo mientras retomaba—: eso mismo es lo que yo acabo de decirle al señor Longdon. Pero él no va a someterla a ninguna comedia.

XII

—¿Es la conmoción del parecido de Nanda a su abuela? —le había preguntado Vanderbank al señor Longdon al reunirse con él en su aislamiento. Con la espalda vuelta, el anciano estaba mirando por la ventana, y cuando a guisa de respuesta le mostró el rostro había lágrimas en sus ojos. De hecho su respuesta estaba precisamente en estas lágrimas, cuyo significado inteligió Vanderbank de inmediato—: O sea que es un parecido aún mayor de lo que usted había advertido en la fotografía.

—Es la cosa más extraordinaria del mundo. Sé que es absurdo haberme alterado tanto —sonrió el señor Longdon a través de sus lágrimas—, pero si usted hubiese conocido a Lady Julia lo comprendería. Es *ella* de nuevo, tal como la conocí por primera vez, vuelta a la vida; y no sólo en los rasgos, la estatura, la tez, los ademanes, sino también en todas las señales y marcas corporales, en todas las miradas de los ojos, sobre todo (¡oh, hasta qué punto!) en el sonido, en el encanto de la voz. —Hablaba lenta y confidencialmente, pero con una intensidad que ahora lo aliviaba: no paraba de moverse en su acceso de emoción. Se desplazaba, en su nerviosismo, suavemente, como presa de un temor sacrosanto: como si, aunque a algunos pasos de distancia, se hallara en presencia de la mismísima difunta—: Toda *ella* es Lady Julia. No tiene ni una traza de su madre. Es algo único: una verdadera resurrección. No le veo trazas de su padre, tampoco: no le veo trazas de nadie más. ¿No se sienten todos maravillados ante ello? —siguió—. ¿Por qué no me lo dijo usted?

—¿Para prepararlo a usted un poco? —Vanderbank casi se sintió culpable—. Entiendo; me habría gustado poder hacerlo… aunque —agregó, risueño— de ese modo, poniéndolo sobre aviso, yo habría podido perderme lo que, si me permite decirlo, me parece uno de los homenajes más conmovedores que jamás he visto rendidos a una mujer. En realidad, sin embargo, ¿cómo podía yo saberlo? Yo nunca conocí a Lady Julia, y usted había recibido por adelantado toda la información de que yo disponía: el retrato (bastante malo, al gusto actual, lo reconozco) y las tres o cuatro fotografías que, junto a él, debió usted de ver en casa de la señora Brook. Estas imágenes debieron de resultar muy semejantes, para usted, a la fotografía que aquí tengo de la nieta. Por supuesto todos nos habíamos fijado en la similitud, pero hacían falta la extraordinaria memoria y la admirable sensibilidad de usted para conjugar todos los detalles.

El señor Longdon reflexionó un momento, pasándose su pañuelo por los ojos:

—Muy cierto, tiene usted razón. Esto es algo que va mucho más allá de cualquier identidad entre imágenes. Pero ¿por qué me dijo usted —añadió con mayor brusquedad— que Nanda no era hermosa?

—Acaba de privarme usted —dijo Vanderbank riendo— de la posibilidad de expresar educadamente mi asombro ante el hecho de que a usted sí se lo parezca. Pero yo no le dije, le ruego que lo recuerde, nada que restringiera ni un ápice mi agrado ante el curioso carácter del rostro de Nanda. Decididamente siempre he encontrado en él algo que evoca la tipología de la época en que debe usted estar pensando. Es un rostro que no tiene nada de contemporáneo. Es un rostro pintado por Sir Thomas Lawrence…

—¡Es un rostro pintado por Gainsborough! —repuso con brío el señor Longdon—. La mismísima Lady Julia rediviva.

Claramente, Vanderbank se sentía tan conmovido como divertido:

—¡Digamos de una vez por todas que es un rostro pintado por Rafael!

Inmediatamente la mano de su viejo amigo se posó sobre su brazo:

—Es exactamente lo que con frecuencia yo me decía pensando en el de Lady Julia.

—La frente está una pizca demasiado elevada —dijo Vanderbank.

—Pero es justamente ese exceso lo que, junto con los exquisitos ojos y la peculiar disposición alrededor de ella del pelo rubio, constituye la gracia personal, constituye la hermosura de la evocadora.

Desasido por el enamorado de Lady Julia, a su vez el joven asió a éste a fin de alentar la confianza:

—Es un rostro que debería tener aquellos largos tirabuzones de 1830[13]. Debería tener el resto del

atavío personal: el abrigo de pieles, la forma del gorro, el vestido de muselina con adornos en forma de ramitas y las sandalias de cordones cruzados. Habría debido venir montada en un tílburi verde claro y debería ser una lectora de la Radcliffe. ¡Y todo para completar el Rafael!

El señor Longdon, que, aliviado por la exposición de sus sentimientos, había comenzado a sobreponerse, miró intensamente a su compañero unos momentos:

—¡Cuánto la ha observado usted!

Vanderbank encaró aquello sin turbación:

—¿Es que hay alguien a quien yo no haya observado? ¿Le agrada Nanda? —preguntó entonces de un modo extraño y abrupto.

El anciano volvió a alejarse:

—¿Cómo puedo decirlo… ante tamañas disparidades?

—Los modales deben de ser diferentes —insinuó Vanderbank—. Y las cosas que Nanda dice.

Otra vez volvió a colocarse frente a él su visitante:

—No sé cómo tomármelo. Son cosas que no armonizan con el resto de ella. Lady Julia —dijo el señor Longdon— era más bien tímida.

Con eso también podía concordar su anfitrión:

—Debía de serlo. Y Nanda (oh, desde luego) no da esa impresión.

—Da la impresión contraria. ¡Y Lady Julia era alegre! —añadió, con una seriedad que hizo sonreír a Vanderbank.

—También me hago cargo. Nanda no hace chistes. Y sin embargo —prosiguió Vanderbank con su modélica sinceridad— no deberíamos hablar de ella, ¿no cree?, como si fuese descarada y sombría.

El señor Longdon lo atalayó:

—¿Cree usted que es una muchacha triste?

Habían mantenido muy bajo el nivel de voz y habrían podido, con las cabezas muy juntas, estar conferenciando cual los participantes a quienes «les toca» en algún juego mientras la pareja permanecía en la habitación vecina.

—Sí. Una muchacha triste. —Pero Vanderbank suspendió la charla—: Ahora mismo la hago venir. —Así fue como había retomado a por ella.

Al reunirse con el señor Longdon, Nanda fue derecha al grano:

—Él dice que es algo precioso lo que usted siente al verme… si eso *es* lo que él quiere decir. —De nuevo el anciano no habló nada al principio: se limitó a sonreírle, pero ahora de un modo menos raro, y luego pareció mirar en derredor buscando algún sitio donde ella pudiera sentarse próxima a él. También en esta habitación había un sofá, sobre el cual, percatándose, raudamente ella se dejó caer, de tal manera que enseguida se encontraron cercanos, sentados un poco oblicuamente y cara a cara. Posiblemente ella había dejado ver que suponía que él desearía cogerle la mano, pero él se abstuvo de tocarla, limitándose a dejarla percibir toda la gentileza de los ancianos ojos y la larga visión retrospectiva de los mismos. Evidentemente estas cosas las percibió ella bien pronto; prosiguió antes de que él hubiera hablado—: Sé lo bien que conocía usted a mi abuela. Mamá me lo ha contado, y me alegra mucho. Me dijo que le dijese que quiere que usted me lo cuente. —Ante esto, habríase dicho que, sobre el semblante del anciano, descendió una leve sombra; mas ¿había alguien presente para observar si la muchacha se daba cuenta? De cualquier modo ello no impidió que ella completara su declaración—: Ésa es la razón de que, hoy, mamá desease que yo viniera sola. Mamá deseaba que usted me tuviera, como dijo ella misma, toda para usted.

No, decididamente, ella no era tímida; esa muda reflexión flotó en el aire unos instantes.

—Sin duda, es la mejor forma. Se lo agradezco muchísimo. Fui a visitarla, tras tener el honor de cenar en vuestra casa… fui a visitarla, creo, tres veces —prosiguió él, con un repentino cambio de tema—; pero las tres veces tuve el infortunio de no hallarla en casa.

Ella seguía mirándolo con su cruda rotundidad adolescente, y dijo:

—Yo no sabía eso. Mamá afirma permanecer en su propia casa más que casi cualquier otra persona. Lo hace a propósito: sabe lo que para la gente significa —insistió Nanda, con su absoluta seriedad— la decepción de no hallarla.

—Oh, aún la hallaré —dijo el señor Longdon—. Y entonces espero hallarte también *a ti*.

Ella semejó ponderar formalmente aquella posibilidad y finalmente encontrarla atractiva:

—Seguro que me hallará a partir de ahora, pues a partir de ahora bajaré de mi habitación.

Su compañero pestañeó:

—¿Al salón, quieres decir… en todas las ocasiones?

Eso era exactamente lo que ella quena decir:

—En todas. Conoceré a todas las personas que acuden. Para mí será algo grande. Quiero escuchar todas las conversaciones. El señor Mitchett dice que debo hacerlo: que eso ayuda a formar las mentes jóvenes. Yo esperaba, por esa razón —continuó con el desparpajo que volvía casi violenta su franqueza—, yo esperaba que hoy vendrían aquí más personas.

—¡Yo me alegro de que no lo hayan hecho! —espetó de un modo parejamente claro el anciano—. Amablemente el señor Vanderbank arregló así el asunto para mí. Lo conocí durante una cena, en casa de tu madre, hace tres semanas, y aquella noche me llevó aquí, donde, dado que teníamos visiones tan contrapuestas de ti, nos tomamos la libertad de discutirte de pies a cabeza. Ello tuvo el efecto, como es natural, de hacerme desear volver sobre el tema de tu persona… sólo que esto parecía dificultoso sin contar con alguna información suplementaria. Y eso fue lo que él tuvo la bondad de ofrecerme; dijo —y el señor Longdon recuperó su buen humor para repetir las palabras—: «¡Diablos, haré venir aquí a todo el grupo por usted!».

—Entiendo; él sabía que los del grupo vendríamos. —Entonces rectificó—: Pero en realidad no hemos venido, ¿verdad?

—Oh, está bien así, está bien así. Para mí es brillante la ocasión y grande la concurrencia. He disfrutado de una charla tal con esos jóvenes…

—Entiendo. —De nuevo ella fue rauda, pero a él habría podido parecerle una persona más literal que cualquier otra persona joven con quien alguna vez se hubiese cruzado—: Usted no está acostumbrado a una charla así. Yo tampoco. Es realmente espléndida, ¿verdad? Se los considera endiabladamente inteligentes al señor Van y al señor Mitchy. ¿Le agradan? —acució.

El señor Longdon, quien, comparado con ella, habría podido parecerle diabólicamente sutil a un espectador, se tomó un instante para reflexionar.

—Hasta hoy no había conocido al señor Mitchett —dijo.

—Vaya, él siempre cree no agradarme —explicó Nanda—. Pero sí me agrada. ¡Qué remedio! —añadió.

Su compañero hizo otra pausa; por último dijo:

—A él le agradas *tú*.

¡Oh, el señor Longdon no habría tenido por qué titubear!

—Ya lo sé. Él mismo se lo ha contado a mamá. Se lo ha contado a cantidad de gente.

—Incluso te lo ha contado a ti —sonrió el señor Longdon.

—Sí… pero no es lo mismo. No creo que el señor Mitchy tenga nada de espeluznante —prosiguió. De todos modos, ella tenía una más apremiante preocupación—: ¿A usted le agrada el señor Van?

Esta vez su interlocutor hizo una tregua de veras larga; finalmente respondió:

—No sabría decir. Me deslumbra.

—Pero ¿a usted no le gusta eso? —Entonces, antes de que él pudiera responder nada, inquirió—: ¿Teme que el señor Van sea una persona engañosa?

Ante esto él se rió francamente:

—¡No te andas con rodeos! —Ella se sonrojó por haberle hecho tanta gracia, pero enseguida él continuó —: Creo que uno experimenta una natural desconfianza cuando se siente arrebatado en volandas. Me temo que siempre me ha gustado demasiado saber adónde voy.

—Y, con él, ¿no lo sabe? —Ella hablaba con su vivo interés inquieto. —Comprendo. Pero creo que a mí sí me gusta ser deslumbrada.

—Ah, es que tú tienes tiempo por delante: siempre puedes corregir tu rumbo; dispones de un margen para accidentes, para padecer decepciones y superarlas; puedes tomar juntas las cosas buenas y las malas. Pero a mí sólo me resta una última oportunidad.

—Y no quiere cometer errores. Entiendo.

—Vaya, soy muy vulnerable.

—Ah, también yo —dijo Nanda—. Le aseguro que pese a lo que me dice no quiero cometer errores tampoco. Ya he visto muchísimos… aunque usted ni lo sospeche —siguió—; sé muy bien lo que pueden ser. ¿Le agrado *yo*? —espetó. Pero incluso en este respecto le ahorró turbaciones al señor Longdon; a ella una mirada pareció bastarle—: ¿Cómo podría usted, naturalmente, decirlo todavía… si no puede decirlo respecto del señor Van? Quiero decir, teniendo en cuenta que a él sí que ya lo ha tratado mucho. Cuando hace un momento él me preguntó si *usted* me agradaba, le respondí que era demasiado pronto. Pero ya no; ya ve usted que el asunto va rápido. Usted sí me agrada. —Ella no le dio tiempo para reaccionar ante este homenaje, sino que, como si hubiese sido algo lógico y normal, enseguida lo puso a prueba con otra pregunta—: ¿Sabría usted decir si le agrada mamá?

Ahora él pudo encarar aquello con bastante facilidad:

—Hay inmensas razones para que me agrade.

—Sí: las sé, como ya he dicho; mamá me lo ha contado. —Pero lo que ella hubo de decirle volvió a sumirlo en estupefacción—: ¿Es que son las razones lo que determina sus afectos? ¡No creo que mamá le agrade! —exclamó—. *Ella* no lo cree —completó.

Finalmente el rostro del anciano, entre desconcertado y confortado, mostró en aún mayor medida algo de gran exquisitez en el efecto que ella le causaba:

—¡Vaya misterios en que os adentráis los del grupo!

—Desde luego que sí: es lo que todo el mundo dice de nosotros. Hablamos de todo y de todos: siempre estamos hablando los unos de los otros. Creo que debemos de ser bastante célebres a causa de ello, y es una especie de vicio (¿verdad?) que resulta contagioso. Pero ¿no le parece que se trata de una charla de una especie sumamente interesante? Mamá dice que carecemos de cualquier prejuicio. *Usted* tiene, probablemente, muchísimos… y muy hermosos; así que quizá yo no debería contarle todo esto. Pero usted terminaría enterándose por su cuenta.

—Sí; soy algo lento de entendederas, pero generalmente termino enterándome de las cosas. Y ciertamente tengo, gracias al cielo —dijo el señor Longdon—, bastantes prejuicios.

—Entonces espero que me cuente algunos —repuso Nanda en un tono obviamente denotador de lo mucho que él le resultaba grato.

—Ah, debes hacer lo mismo que *yo*: debes enterarte por tu cuenta. Es realmente prodigioso tu parecido a tu abuela —añadió a renglón seguido.

—De eso quiero que me hable: de sus recuerdos sobre ella y sus maravillosos sentimientos hacia ella. Mamá me ha contado algunas cosas, pero que yo las escuche directamente de usted es precisamente lo que asimismo ella desea. Mi abuela debió de ser endiabladamente cautivadora —siguió divagando la muchacha — y, sea como fuere, no me veo a mí misma como la misma clase de persona.

—Oh, yo no digo que seas en absoluto la misma clase de persona: lo único a que aludo —replicó el señor Longdon— es el milagro de la herencia física. Nada podría parecerse menos a ella que tus modales y tu conversación.

Nanda lo miró con toda su franqueza:

—No son igual de buenos, pensará usted.

Él hizo una pausa momentánea, pero fue tan franco como ella:

—Entre ella y tú media un abismo… y no sólo temporal. Personalmente, ¿sabes?, respiras un aire distinto.

Ella reflexionó; asimiló todo aquello.

—Ya —dijo—. Y usted respira el mismo: el mismo viejo aire, quiero decir, que mi abuela.

—El mismo viejo aire —sonrió el señor Longdon—, tanto como ello es posible. Algún día te hablaré más sobre lo que tanto te interesa. Me siento incapaz de ponerme a hacerlo ahora.

—¿Porque lo he hecho sentirse tan indispuesto? —preguntó Nanda sin tapujos.

—Es una de las razones.

—Creo que adivino otra también —observó ella tras un instante—. Usted no está seguro de hasta qué punto seré capaz de entender. Pero entenderé —siguió— más, tal vez, de lo que se figura. De hecho —dijo solemnemente—, *prometo* entender. Tengo algo de imaginación. ¿La tenía mi abuela? —preguntó. No es que fueran extraordinariamente veloces sus pensamientos, pero ya se había adelantado a él—: Ya he sentido curiosidad sobre ello otras veces, porque le planteé la misma pregunta a mamá.

—Y ¿qué contestó tu madre?

—«¿Imaginación mi querida mamaíta? ¡Ni pizca!».

El anciano exhibió un leve sonrojo:

—O sea que, para compensarlo, tu madre tiene una buena cantidad.

La muchacha lo atalayó, ante esto, con una atención más incisiva.

—A usted no le gusta que mamá haya dicho eso —insinuó.

Se hizo más vivo el rubor del anciano, aunque una sonrisa levemente forzada hizo lo que pudo por atemperarlo:

—Elija mía, en lo que se refiere a la difunta amiga de quien estoy hablándote, se me da una higa de cualquier opinión que no sea la mía propia.

—¿Incluso de la de la hija?

—Incluso de la de la hija. —El señor Longdon no había alzado la voz, pero resonó tan recio como una campana.

Admirada ante ello, casi por primera vez Nanda ensayó una sonrisa:

—¡Usted se comporta como si mi abuela fuera casi propiedad *exclusiva* de usted!

—Oh, casi.

—¡Canastos, eso es fabuloso!

—Me alegra que te complazca —repuso él deferentemente.

Aquella misma deferencia la paralizó. Finalmente ella volvió a hablar con vehemencia:

—Dispense que le hable así, pero estoy segura de que sabe a qué me refiero. No debe pensar que mamá no desea también escuchar lo que usted diga.

—¿Sobre Lady Julia? —Educadamente, pero con gran taxatividad, hizo un ademán negativo con la cabeza—: Tu madre jamás escuchará lo que yo diga.

Nanda pareció sorprenderse un instante, y otra vez ello la tornó por completo grave:

—¿Todo será *para mi*?

—Todo lo que me parezca oportuno sacar a la luz, hija mía.

—Ah, ya se lo extraeré yo todo —replicó ella sin vacilar. Aquella mezcolanza, en la personalidad de la muchacha, de despreocupada vulgaridad y de la vividez evocativa de algo —lo que quiera que ello fuese— diametralmente opuesto, la pequeña inquietud de este no enteramente desagradable contraste, continuó ocupando la conciencia masculina más perceptiblemente que cualquier otra cosa. En los ágiles ojos castaños del anciano se traslucía inequívocamente que de manera alternada ella lo cautivaba y lo descorazonaba, pero también que lo que la mirada de dichos ojos principiaba a discernir cada vez más era que por debajo de la tiesura de ella había una emoción temblorosa. El atisbo que él tenía de esto había ido creciendo; el atisbo que él tenía de esto se impuso triunfalmente cuando de súbito, tras aquella última declaración, ella espetó con un tono radicalmente igual pero con un efecto radicalmente distinto—: ¡Me alegro de parecerme a cualquiera cuyo recuerdo lo haga sentirse tan dichoso! Usted *es* una buena persona —prosiguió—; ya puedo ver hasta qué punto voy a opinar así. —Ella lo miró fijamente con lágrimas en los ojos, ante la vista de las cuales rebrotaron las de él, de tal forma que por un momento ambos permanecieron así, sentados cerca el uno del otro.

—¡Mi querida muchacha! —musitó él con sencillez finalmente. Pero ahora sí puso su mano sobre la de ella, e inmediatamente ella se la asió.

—Ya se acostumbrará usted a mí —dijo Nanda haciendo gala de la misma gentileza que había tratado de expresar con la reacción de su propia mano—; y con usted voy a ser tan delicada que… ¡bueno, ya verá! —Ella se interrumpió con un nudo en la garganta, y al siguiente instante se dio la vuelta: había alguien en el umbral. Aún no completamente serenado, Vanderbank había vuelto para dedicarles una sonrisa. Desasiéndose del señor Longdon, ella se incorporó inmediatamente para recibirlo—: Tenías razón, señor Van. ¡Es algo precioso, precioso, precioso!

Libro Cuarto

EL SEÑOR CASHMORE

XIII

Harold Brookenham, a quien el señor Cashmore, hecho pasar y anunciado, había hallado en pleno acto de tomarse una taza de té ante la mesa aparentemente recién preparada… Harold Brookenham, digo, fue al grano con una acometida tan directa como para presentarle a su visitante una opción entre nada más que dos suposiciones: la de una zambullida a la desesperada, para pasar cuanto antes aquella vergüenza, o la de la arraigada costumbre de formular tamañas peticiones, la cual le había inculcado al muchacho el camino más corto. No había una gran perspicacia en el rostro del señor Cashmore, quien de alguna forma era masivo pero sin majestuosidad; de todos modos acaso no había sido impermeable a la sospecha de que la turbación de su joven amigo no era sino una precaución facilona, un deliberado correctivo contra el peligro de parecer descarado. No habría resultado imposible especular que si Harold bajaba la vista y se mostraba agitado era primordialmente en aras de las apariencias. Tal vez la experiencia había enseñado que uno podía pedir un billete de cinco libras igual que uno pedía lumbre para el pitillo; pero uno debía refrenar el campechano impulso de pedir ambas cosas con el mismo estilo. Lo cierto es que el señor Cashmore había parecido sorprenderse, si bien no tantísimo globalmente como el joven parecía haberse esperado. Hubo casi una sutil elegancia en la combinación de prontitud y recato con que Harold asumió la responsabilidad de la absoluta posesión del crujiente papel-moneda que con lenta firmeza deslizó dentro del bolsillo de su chaleco, frotándolo durante esta operación delicadamente contra el dril de suave color amarillo pardusco con que había sido confeccionada dicha prenda.

—Es tan endiabladísimamente gentil por su parte, que en verdad no sé qué decir. —Hubo una marcada semejanza, en la entonación de estas palabras, con la dulzura de los desánimos de su madre y la suavidad de los gemidos de la misma. Era como si en ese momento se hubiese sentido tentado de moralizar, pero la mirada que alzó hacia su benefactor tuvo el sumamente extraño efecto de identificar a este mismísimo personaje como el inspirador de la moraleja.

El señor Cashmore, que habría sido muy pelirrojo si no hubiese sido muy calvo, ostentaba un monóculo y un voluminoso labio superior; era tan corpulento como garboso, con gestitos avinagrados e intensas exclamaciones que no se acordaban con su tipología.

—Puedes decir lo que quieras —repuso— con tal que no digas que ya me lo devolverás. Eso es siempre un despropósito; lo odio.

Harold siguió melancólico, pero se mostró realmente supremo:

—En tal caso no lo diré. —Pensativamente, durante unos momentos, pareció imaginarse aquellas palabras, en su plena absurdidad, pronunciadas por los labios de algún joven que, a diferencia de él, no fuese discreto—. Comprendo muy bien a qué se refiere.

—Pero mi opinión, ¿sabes?, es que deberías contárselo a tu padre —dijo el señor Cashmore.

—¿Contarle que le he pedido prestado a usted?

Bienhumoradamente el señor Cashmore dudó:

—Eso me estaría bien empleado… es tan increíble que yo haya atendido tu petición. Cuéntaselo, desde luego —siguió tras un instante—. Pero lo que quería decir es que si pasas tales estrecheces deberías hablar con él como un hombre.

Harold sonrió ante la ingenuidad de un amigo capaz de imaginar que él no había agotado ya aquel recurso:

—*Siempre* estoy hablando con él como un hombre, y es precisamente eso lo que lo saca de sus casillas. En mis propias narices niega que yo sea un hombre. Podría inferirse, escuchándolo, no sólo que lo que soy es un niño malo, sino además que apenas soy siquiera humano. Es incapaz de concebir que yo padezca ninguna necesidad.

—Huy —dijo riendo el señor Cashmore—, todos los jovenzuelos tenéis tantas necesidades, ya lo sé,

como la sección de ofertas de trabajo de *The Times*.

Harold manifestó admiración:

—Qué aguda frase. Si usted cree tener el deber de hablar sobre ello —continuó—, mejor hágalo con mamá. —Se fijó en la hora—. Me marcho, si me dispensa usted, para darle oportunidad de hacerlo.

El visitante consultó su propio reloj y dijo:

—Es tu propia madre quien da oportunidades… las oportunidades que *tú* aprovechas.

Harold se mostró cortés y formal:

—Ella *ha* llegado, lo sé. Estará con usted dentro de un instante.

El muchacho ya había recorrido la mitad de la distancia que los separaba de la puerta, pero el señor Cashmore, pese a toda su condescendencia, aún no había concluido con él:

—Supongo que quieres decir que si es sólo tu madre quien se entera, puedes confiar en que te encubrirá.

Harold le dio vueltas a aquello como si fuese una moneda de curso dudoso, pero tras pensarlo mejor sonrió maravillosamente:

—¿Cree que después de haberme prestado dinero está usted en condiciones de hablar sobre ello? Estaría en condiciones, desde luego, si se hubiese negado. —Semejó examinar todas las posibilidades en beneficio del señor Cashmore—. Pero no me importa —agregó— que se lo cuente a mamá.

—¿No te importa, quieres decir de veras, que eso la consterne bárbaramente?

La invitación al arrepentimiento contenida en esto no pudo menos que parecerle absurda al joven: era demasiado previa al disfrute de cualquier placer. A Harold le gustaba que las cosas se presentaran en su orden debido; pero a la vez su capacidad de maniobra era pasmosa:

—No cabe duda de que *soy* egoísta, pero en lo que pensaba era en que el terrible sermón, ¿sabe?…, vaya, estoy dispuesto a recibirlo de *ella*. Ella sabe lo que es la vida; sabe de nuestra necesidad de salir adelante después de que, sin tener nosotros arte ni parte, nuestros progenitores nos hayan puesto a caminar. Lo sabe todo sobre necesidades: nadie tiene más que mamá.

El señor Cashmore se quedó mirando extrañado, pero también con pinta de diversión:

—¿Así que ella dirá que has hecho bien?

—Oh, no; me echará un tremendo rapapolvo. Pero reconocerá que en semejantes aprietos hay que hacer algo más en pro de servidor, y eso bien podría conducir a algo (indirectamente, ¿se da usted cuenta?, pues ella no se lo *contará* a mi padre, sino que únicamente, a su peculiar modo, influirá sobre él) que me colocará en circunstancias más cómodas y por lo cual, consiguientemente, en el fondo tendré que darle las gracias *a usted*.

El ojo auxiliado por el monóculo del señor Cashmore había atalayado, durante esta alocución, con un perceptible aumento de algo semejante a la inquietud, al beneficiario de su rumbosidad. De alguna forma el hilo de su relación mutua se había extraviado en este giro imprevisto, y el señor Cashmore hubo de limitarse a hacer gala de su estatura, su posición y su rectitud, cosas siempre convenientes en presencia del retorcimiento:

—No voy a contarle nada a tu madre, pero creo que debería alegrarme bastante de que no seas hijo mío.

Ante este nuevo elemento de la conversación Harold se maravilló:

—¿Es que sus hijos nunca…?

—…¿piden prestado dinero a los visitantes de su madre? —El señor Cashmore había recogido sus palabras, deseoso, a las claras, de responderle concienzudamente; pero la pregunta fue atacada de flanco por la señora Brookenham en persona, quien había abierto la puerta mientras hablaba este amigo y avanzó rápidamente haciéndose eco de ella:

—¿Los visitantes de Lady Fanny? —Y, aunque la mirada femenina más bien rehuyó que encaró la del marido de milady, ella pareció envolverlo con una despistada pero experta comprensión—: ¿Qué diantres estás contándole a Harold sobre ellos? —Así fue como al cabo de unos minutos el señor Cashmore, sentado en el sofá cara a cara con ella, halló su propia conciencia absolutamente purgada de su reciente sensación de debilidad y vio que tomaba un nuevo giro el problema de lo que, en el propio salón de uno, puede tramarse a espaldas de uno. Harold se había esfumado raudamente, había sido tácitamente despachado; e incluso en tan breve lapso de tiempo el visitante de la señora Brook ya había explorado una vía tan distinta que había suscitado en su anfitriona esta pequeña pregunta serena—: ¿«Regalos»? ¡No querrás decir dinero!

Él sintió plenamente la importancia de dejar claro lo que quería decir, aunque fuese mediante su silencio y su monóculo.

—La dispendiosidad de mi esposa —explicó al fin— supera todo límite, y aun cuando hay bastantes facturas, bien lo sabe Dios, que me llegan a mí, no concibo cómo logra apañárselas a menos que haya otras que les llegan a otros.

La señora Brookenham le había servido su té; el suyo propio lo había dejado sobre una mesita cercana a ella, y ya estaba en condiciones de entregarse generosamente al impulso experimentado, ante aquello, de consagrarse a un asunto de auténtico interés. Excepto a Harold ella era incapaz de hacerle reproches a nadie, si bien había diversos grados, naturalmente, dentro de su tolerancia, y para un espectador la descripción que de ella había hecho su hija ante el señor Longdon en el sentido de que carecía de prejuicios se habría visto corroborada por el peculiar sentimiento que las palabras del señor Cashmore la movieron a exteriorizar. ¿Qué pareció espectacularmente dicho sentimiento sino extrañamente digresivo?

—Pierdo la paciencia cuando te oigo hablar como si no fueras asquerosamente rico.

Él la miró un instante como especulando que tal vez ella se había formado aquella idea a través de Harold, y replicó:

—¿A qué viene eso? ¿Acaso un hombre rico disfruta más que uno pobre cuando su mujer lo hace pasar por tonto?

Los ojos femeninos se abrieron exageradamente: era una de las escasísimas formas en que ella delataba sentirse divertida. En realidad aquí había poco ante lo cual sentirse divertido salvo el preciso calificativo infamante que él había escogido para sí mismo.

—Sabes muy bien que no te creo ni una palabra —dijo ella.

El señor Cashmore se bebió su té, después se levantó para dejar la taza en algún sitio y la depositó, rehusando con un gesto toda ayuda. Cuando otra vez se hubo sentado en el sofá reanudó su charla íntima:

—Me gusta enormemente estar contigo, pero no debes pensar que he acudido aquí para tolerarte decirme cosas tan desagradables. —El señor Cashmore era un compuesto insólito, y su aire de salud personal, la impoluta lozanía que a veces infundía una monstruosa serenidad al modo como mencionaba sin mayor problema lo apenas mencionable, era un rasgo compensado o igualado por su gracioso empleo de rodeos semánticos para referirse a cosas mucho menos comprometidas—. Ya sabes para qué acudo a ti, señora Brook; no estoy dispuesto a acudir más si te propones mostrarte intratable y ofensiva.

—Acudes a mí, supongo, porque (para mi profunda desventura, te lo garantizo) tengo una especie de capacidad de ver las cosas, de ver la miserable degradación en que todos os enredáis y con la cual vosotros mismos disfrutáis tan poco como si, revolviéndoos unos encima de otros en montón, fuerais una camada de gatitos atolondrados.

—¡Ésa es una metáfora de campeonato: no sabes qué ánimos me das! —Él había prorrumpido en regocijo con el estilo de un hombre que tomara nota de cualquier dicho ingenioso para su posterior uso en una tribuna; pero al siguiente instante volvió a ponerse serio, cual si su propio comentario le hubiese recordado el cumplido que Harold acababa de dedicar a su agudeza fraseológica. Fue con este talante como espetó abruptamente—: ¿Dónde, por cierto, está tu hija?

—No tengo la menor idea. Hago todo lo que puedo para participar en la vida que ella lleva, pero es imposible montarse en un tren mientras marcha a toda máquina.

Nuevamente el señor Cashmore basculó hacia la hilaridad:

—Eres un manantial de sorpresas. ¿Quieres decir que ella es tan «desbocada»? —Él sabía mantener la bola rodando.

La señora Brookenham vaciló:

—No; es una maravillosa criatura, y somos muy buenas amigas. Pero ella tiene su joven vida libre, que, merced a esa ley de nuestra época que estoy segura de que sólo deseo (como en el caso de todas las demás leyes, una vez que sé en qué *consisten*) acatar… ella tiene su preciosa juventud de experiencias que me digo a mí misma que, en lo que respecta a ejercer control, debo respetar. Procuro sentarme a hablar con ella, y a menudo ella se presta, porque es amable. Pero antes de poder darme cuenta vuelve a dejarme sola: opina que su presencia impone restricciones a la libertad de mis conversaciones con los demás.

Ante tal cuadro el señor Cashmore se sintió impresionado:

—Cuánta consideración por su parte.

—¿A que es un encanto? —Este pensamiento, para la señora Brook, francamente semejó abrir amplias perspectivas—: ¡La hija moderna!

—¡Pero no la madre arcaica! —sonrió el señor Cashmore.

Con la cabeza ella hizo un gesto negativo que insinuó todo un mundo de asumidas aflicciones:

—«¡Devolvedme, devolvedme siquiera un instante de mi perdida juventud!». Ah, en mí ya no queda una sola vibración que me permita corresponder a un cumplido. Ahora me siento aquí a afrontar las cosas tal como son. A su debido tumo las cosas van llegando, te lo aseguro… y me hallan —suspiró la señora Brook — preparada. Nanda ha irrumpido en escena, y yo le cedo todo el teatro. Además —siguió pensativamente — todo esto resulta inmensamente interesante. *Es* la hija moderna: entre mi hija y yo realmente estamos

«creando» este personaje; y dado que lo moderno ha sido siempre mi propio lema (siempre he procurado sinceramente, quiero decir, estar en sintonía con mi Tiempo), ¿quién es una, a fin de cuentas, para negarse a seguir el rumbo que lo moderno pueda marcarle? —El señor Cashmore no se consideró preparado para responder a esta pregunta, y su anfitriona continuó en un tono distinto—: ¡Es maravilloso que ella se preocupe por ahorrarme quebraderos de cabeza!

Para el visitante, aquello era terreno más firme:

—¿Te refieres a lo de charlar con otras personas delante de ella?

Fue decididamente tierna la confirmación de la señora Brook:

—No está dispuesta a recortar en lo más mínimo mi felicidad. Es como si la pobre criatura *supiera*, ¿te das cuenta?, las cosas sobre las que, si no, deberíamos abstenemos de hablar. Quiere que no tengamos que medir nuestras palabras. ¡Es casi maternal! —meditó otra vez. Luego, como con el placer de exponérselo de nuevo, exclamó—: ¡Ésta sí que es la hija moderna!

—Pues bien —dijo el señor Cashmore—, yo no puedo evitar desear que fuese un poco menos considerada. En ese caso yo podría encontrarla aquí contigo, y sinceramente puedo decirte que ella se ocupa de mí mejor que tú. Para mí tiene el gran mérito, en primer lugar, de no ser tan ferviente admiradora de mi esposa. La señora Brookenham recogió con interés aquellas palabras:

—En efecto, tienes razón: ella no *trata*, a diferencia de mí, a Lady Fanny, y en cierta forma eso es toda una suerte.

—Ahí lo tienes, entonces, incoherente criatura —exclamó él con una carcajada—; después de todo resulta que *sí* me crees. Admites lo descarriado que para tu hija sería no darse cuenta de que Fanny es una malvada.

—Qué pesado te pones, mi querido amigo —replicó la señora Brook—, con tus ridículas simplificaciones. Fanny no es «malvada»; es magníficamente buena… en el sentido de ser desprendida y natural y genuina, adorablemente espontánea y sin la menor mesquinerie. Es una gran estatua calmosa de plata.

El señor Cashmore exhibió, ante esto, parte de la energía que se adquiere con la reiterada práctica del debate público:

—Entonces, ¿por qué te alegras de que tu hija no haga buenas migas con ella?

La señora Brook sonrió como con la tristeza de contar con muchísimos elementos para salir victoriosa:

—Porque yo no estoy, como Fanny, desprovista de mesquinerie. No soy desprendida y natural. Estoy exageradamente preocupada por Nanda. Me preocupa, a pesar de mí misma, lo que la gente pueda decir. Tu esposa no: siente una altiva indiferencia. Yo puedo ser una pizca menos valiente debido al riesgo de que mi hija pueda no opinar como el resto de la sociedad.

El señor Cashmore había seguido aquello con bastante dificultad:

—¿«Opinar» sobre ella?

La señora Brook se mantuvo en la brecha:

—Habría, en ese caso, tal vez, algo que advertirle a mi hija que no proclamara a voces. Cuando dices —continuó— que servidora admite, en lo relativo a Fanny, alguna tacha, tergiversas horrorosamente lo que servidora reconoce sin tapujos: que Fanny es una gran pagana gloriosa. Es una inmensa satisfacción encontrarse ante un espécimen así: es como un fragmento vivo de Historia. Así y todo, si me preguntas por qué entonces no es conveniente que las jóvenes criaturas «proclamen a voces», como yo digo, ciertas cosas, tengo perfectamente preparada mi respuesta. —Tras lo cual, como su visitante pareciera no sólo demasiado anonadado como para dudarlo, sino también demasiado desconcertado como para establecer distingos, en aras de su propia reputación, entre resignarse y asombrarse, ella declaró—: Porque Fanny es un ser puramente instintivo. Sus instintos son espléndidos… pero eso es aterrador.

—¡Es todo cuanto siempre he afirmado que eso es! —exclamó el señor Cashmore—. Es aterrador.

—Bien —repuso su amiga—. Yo la observo. Todos la observamos. Igual que si observáramos un grandioso fenómeno natural lleno de poesía: un amanecer alpino o una gran pleamar.

—¡Eres increíble! —dijo riéndose el señor Cashmore—. También yo la observo.

—Y asimismo te observo *a ti* —prosiguió diáfanamente la señora Brook—. Lo que no me creo ni por un momento es que haya otro hombre que paga las facturas de Fanny. Es *muchísimo* más probable —comentó sagazmente— que permanezcan perpetuamente impagadas.

—¡Ah, bueno, si ella puede seguir en ese plan…!

—Es imposible que en todo Londres exista un establecimiento —siguió la señora Brook— donde no se sientan entusiasmados de vestir a una mujer semejante. Ella publicita las ropas, ¿no te das cuenta?, igual que una hermosa región turística publicita los letreros en los campos y los carteles en los peñascos. Además,

¿qué pruebas puedes aducir? —preguntó.

El señor Cashmore se sentía cada vez más agitado; se quitó una hilacha suelta de la rodilla del pantalón y dijo:

—¡Oh, cuando hablas de «aducir»…! —Pareció indicar, como con la insinuación de que si ella no tenía más cuidado acabaría resultándole fastidiosa, que aquél era el tipo de palabra que él utilizaba exclusivamente en la Cámara de los Comunes.

—Cuando hablo de aducir eres incapaz de contestarme —replicó ella plácidamente. Pero le clavó la mirada con su fatigada penetración—: Intentas creer lo que no *puedes* creer, a fin de encontrar excusas para ti mismo. Y *ella* hace igual… sólo que menos, pues ella reconoce menos, en general, la necesidad de contar con excusas. Ella es tan grandiosa y tan sencilla.

El pobre señor Cashmore se quedó mirando fijamente:

—¿Más grandiosa y más sencilla que yo, quieres decir?

La señora Brookenham reflexionó:

—No más sencilla, no; pero sí mucho más grandiosa. A decir verdad ella no vería, en el caso que imaginas, la necesidad de eso que imaginas.

El señor Cashmore se quedó atónito; aquello era casi críptico.

—No te entiendo —declaró.

Viéndolo todo desde oscuras profundidades, la señora Brook escarbó aún más y más hondo:

—¡Hemos hablado tanto sobre ella!

El señor Cashmore refunfuñó como si lo supiera sobradamente:

—¡Vaya si hemos hablado sobre ella!

—Me refiero a *nosotros*. —Fue fabuloso cómo su énfasis matizó—. También hemos hablado sobre ti… pero claro está que hablamos sobre todo el mundo. —Ella hizo una pausa a través de la cual brilló débilmente un rayo procedente de horas luminosas: la intimidad privada que él, por muy privilegiado que fuese, no podía pretender compartir; luego espetó casi con impaciencia—: Nosotros cuidamos de ella: ¡déjanosla a *nosotros*!

Súbitamente él asumió un aire tan intrigado como para parecer sentirse de veras envidioso, mas procuró librarse de este sentimiento:

—No sé si, pensándolo bien, sois buenos para ella.

Pero la señora Brookenham sí lo sabía:

—Ella es justo la clase de persona para quien *somos* buenos, y lo que le conviene es estar con nosotros cuanto sea posible: simplemente compartir nuestra existencia sincera y condescendientemente, atender a nuestras charlas, sentir nuestra confianza en ella, ser sostenida, ¿no te das cuenta?, por la conciencia de lo que nosotros esperamos de su espléndida tipología, y así, poco a poco, dejar que actúe nuestra influencia. Lo que hace un momento quise decir es que me la imagino perfectamente aceptando lo que tú llamas regalos.

—Pues entonces —inquirió el señor Cashmore— ¿qué más quieres?

Por unos instantes la señora Brook hizo una tregua; pareció a punto de informarlo.

—En cambio no me la imagino, como ya he dicho, viendo la obligación —completó.

—¿La obligación?…

—De dar nada a cambio. Nada de nada. —La señora Brook se mostró taxativa—. ¿La percatación de pequeñas insinuaciones? ¡Nunca!

—Yo no digo que las insinuaciones sean pequeñas —objetó el señor Cashmore.

—Caramba, ella es una gran criatura. ¡Si ella cae…! —La anfitriona se abismó en esa visión, que por fin tenía completa ante sí—. Ten por seguro que todos nos enteraremos.

—¡Es exactamente lo que me asusta!

—Pues no te asustes hasta que nos asustemos nosotros. Ella caería, por así decirlo, sobre *nosotros*, ¿no lo ves?, y —dijo la señora Brook, esta vez con resolución en el ademán negativo de su cabeza— eso no podría ser. Nosotros *tenemos* que sostenerla; esa es tu garantía. Es más bien excesivo —agregó con idéntico incremento de su vivacidad— tener que sostenerte también *a ti*. No te quepa ninguna duda de que si realmente Carrie flaquea…

—¿Carrie?

Su interrupción fue claramente demasiado imprecisa para ser sincera, y como tal la recibió ella completando su propia frase:

—…nunca más le concederé tres minutos de atención. Responder de Fanny ante ti sin estar en condiciones de…

—…¿de responder de mí ante Fanny, quieres decir? —Él se había sonrojado velozmente como si ya se hubiese esperado esto—. No te apetece, ¿es eso? Pues bien, espero que te aliviará —siguió con brío— saber que *aborrezco* completamente a la señora Donner.

Pasmada, la señora Brook recibió aquel anuncio mudando de color por entero:

—Y ¿desde cuándo, si me haces el favor? —Era como si un edificio se hubiera venido abajo—. Ella estuvo aquí hace muy poco, y estaba tan llena de ti, la pobre, como lo está de carne un huevo relleno.

El señor Cashmore no pudo menos que sonrojarse por ella:

—No digo que ella no lo estuviera. Mi vida se me ha convertido en algo abrumador a causa de ella.

Para un espectador, nada habría podido resultar tan insólito como la decepción de la señora Brook a no ser la resolución de esta misma dama:

—¿Ya has terminado con ella?

—¡Uno nunca ha terminado con un moscón pelmazo…!

—…¿hasta que literalmente uno lo ha matado? —gimió la señora Brookenham—. No puedo creer lo que me cuentas, mi querido amigo: fuiste tú mismo quien originariamente destiló el veneno que corre por sus venas. —Ante esto él se incorporó de un salto como si no pudiese aguantarlo, ofreciendo mientras se poma a caminar por la habitación, empero, una espalda ancha, improcedente, fugitiva, en la cual ella posó su mirada como si se tratase de una prueba de lo atinado de lo que ella misma había dicho—: Si lo echas todo a perder intentando mentirme, ¿cómo voy a poder ayudarte?

Él se había dedicado a contemplar, en su agitación, uno o dos cuadros, pero finalmente se dio la vuelta:

—¿Con quiénes hablas sobre nosotros? ¿Con Petherton y su amigo Mitchy? ¿Con tu adorado Vanderbank? ¿Con tu terrible duquesa?

—Ya conoces a mi pequeño círculo, y no siempre lo has menospreciado. —Mientras él retomaba ella le replicó con una metáfora que fue obvio que se le apareció alumbradora—: ¡No infames tu propia cuna! Recuerda que al fin y al cabo nosotros somos quienes más o menos te hemos creado. —Ella esbozó una sonrisa que suavizó un poco su metáfora, pues hubo intimaciones que tras pensárselo mejor él pareció dispuesto a aceptar de ella. Ella dio palmaditas en el sofá como para invitarlo a volver a sentarse, y aunque él siguió de pie ante ella, fue con un semblante que pareció evidenciar que le habían llegado hondo las palabras femeninas—. Ya sabes que nunca me ha parecido que nos hayas hecho pleno honor, pero fue porque *ella* te tomó por uno de nosotros por lo que en un principio Carrie…

Ante esto, para acallarla, él se sentó enfáticamente en el sofá diciendo:

—Te aseguro que de veras no ha habido nada. —Sin cesar en su agitación sacó su reloj—: ¿Es que al final no va a venir?

—¿Te refieres a Nanda?

—Habla sobre mí con *ella* —sonrió— si te apetece. Si no te crees que para mí la señora Donner es como polvo y cenizas —insistió—, le haces poca justicia a tu hija.

—¿Pretendes darme la noticia de que estás enamorado de Nanda?

Él aguardó, pero sólo como para darle mayor peso a su respuesta:

—A más no poder. No soy capaz de expresarte cuánto me gusta.

Se quedó maravillada:

—Y ¿cómo va a ayudarme eso, si me haces el favor? Ayudarme, quiero decir, a ayudarte. ¿Es eso lo que debo contarle a tu esposa?

Él siguió sentado y apartó la mirada, mas saltaba a la vista que había tenido una idea, que por fin expuso:

—Caramba, ¿acaso no sería ésa justamente la solución? Precisamente ello demostraría mi pureza.

En el momentáneo silencio de ella habría podido haber un indicio de aceptación de aquello como una contribución práctica a su mutuo problema, y de hecho había varias luces bajo las cuales podía considerarse. De una rápida ojeada, la señora Brook escogió la luz irónica:

—Entiendo, entiendo. Por regla de tres podría arreglármelas para convencer a Lady Fanny de sentirse enamorada de Edward. Eso «demostraría» la pureza *de ella*. Y tú podrías respirar tranquilo —dijo riéndose —: ¡Edward no haría regalos de ninguna clase!

El señor Cashmore la miró con una franqueza que fue casi un reproche al jolgorio de su interlocutora:

—A tu hija la aprecio mucho más que a ti.

Pero ello no hizo sino divertirla más:

—¿Se debe tal vez a que yo no demuestro tu pureza?

Lo que él habría podido contestar quedó inespecificado, pues se abrió la puerta tan al mismo tiempo que ella hablaba, que él volvió a ponerse en pie con un sobresalto y el mayordomo, entrando, recibió en pleno

rostro aquella pregunta de la anfitriona. No obstante, en la reacción de este empleado ante ello no hubo más que la habitual austeridad:

—El señor Vanderbank y el señor Longdon.

Estos visitantes tardaron algunos momentos en aparecer, y la señora Brook, impertérrita —limitándose a seguir mirando con calma al señor Cashmore desde el sofá—, aprovechó este lapso, según habría podido inferirse, para enmendar cualquier impresión de indebida ligereza producida por su anterior pregunta:

—¿Dónde te viste con Nanda por última vez?

Él escudriñó el umbral para comprobar si alguien podía oírlo, y después contestó:

—En casa de los Grendon.

—¿Así que sueles acudir allá?

—El otro día me trasladé allá desde Hicks para pasar una hora.

—Y ¿estaba Carrie?

—Sí. Fue todo un suplicio. Pero conversé sólo con tu hija.

La anfitriona se irguió —los otros se aproximaban— y le ofreció al señor Cashmore un semblante que a él tal vez le pareciera misterioso.

—Eso es grave —dijo ella.

—¿Grave? —Él no tuvo ojos para los otros.

—Ella no me lo había contado.

Él emitió un sonido, controlado por la discreción, que no obstante fue de una índole que hizo que el señor Longdon —quien se veía ante el señor Cashmore por vez primera— reaccionara con algo de la rigidez de una persona saludada con una risotada. Al señor Cashmore manifiestamente le había agradado este silencio de Nanda sobre su encuentro.

XIV

La señora Brookenham, que lo presentó al más maduro de sus visitantes, halló asimismo, al servirles té a estos caballeros, ocasión de decirle en un aparte con irresistible intensidad:

—Entabla conversación con el señor Longdon: llévatelo *ahí*. —Ella le indicó el sofá del extremo opuesto de la estancia y le dio ejemplo tomando posesión por su parte, en el mismo asiento que hasta ahora había estado ocupando, de su «adorado». Vanderbank. Esta maniobra, empero, cuando la hubo concluido, constituyó para ella, en su propio rincón, el tema de una pregunta inmediata—: ¿Me odiará aún más por hacer esto?

Vanderbank les echó un vistazo a los demás, e inquirió:

—¿Cashmore, quieres decir?

—Cielos, no: me importa un bledo a quién odie *él*. Pero con el señor Longdon quiero evitar errores.

—¡Entonces no lo intentes tan drásticamente! —exclamó Vanderbank riendo—. ¿Es ése tu motivo para haberlo arrojado en brazos de Cashmore?

—Sí, exactamente… a fin de disponer de estos pocos minutos para solicitarte instrucciones; ya debes de conocerlo, a estas alturas, bastante bien. Lo único que anhelo, el cielo me asista, es ser con él lo más simpática posible.

—Sin duda es lo mejor que puedes hacer y es la única razón de que, esta tarde, yo lo haya traído conmigo: para que tuviera mejor suerte en lo relativo a hallarte en casa (fue él mismo quien lo sugirió) que la que ha tenido a solas. En términos generales —agregó Vanderbank— me dedico a cuidar de él.

—Entiendo… y él se dedica a cuidar de ti. —La encantadora desinformación de la señora Brook ya había llegado a observar eso—. Quiere comprobar lo que yo pueda estar haciéndote, quiere salvarte de mí. Me detesta a fondo.

No menos intrigado que divertido, Vanderbank se puso cómodo echándose hacia atrás:

—¡No hay nadie como tú: eres verdaderamente magnífica!

—Lo *soy*; y mi capacidad de mirar de frente la realidad y no perder la calma o la sensatez a causa de ello es, como ya sabes, la única cosa en el mundo por la cual pienso relativamente bien de mí misma.

—¡Oh sí, ya lo sé, ya lo sé: eres verdaderamente maravillosa!

Durante una breve pausa, la señora Brookenham incrementó su propia sapiencia; y dijo:

—Están pasándoselo bien; ¡el señor Longdon está tomándose a Cashmore con tal seriedad!

—Y ¿con qué está tomándoselo Cashmore a él?

—Con la esperanza de que, de un momento a otro, se presente Nanda.

—Pero ¿qué importancia tiene eso para Cashmore?

—Por la extraordinaria afición que súbitamente le ha tomado a Nanda. —La señora Brook había sido rauda en asimilar la situación—: Ha estado viéndose con ella en casa de Tishy, y ella le ha hablado tan contundentemente sobre su proceder que lo ha hecho dejar de pensar en Carrie. Actualmente él la prefiere a *ella*… y desde luego ella es mucho más maja.

Ahora la atención de Vanderbank, fue obvio, había sido plenamente atrapada:

—Ella es mucho más maja… ¡Ya lo creo! ¿Acaso lo que quieres decir es —preguntó al momento siguiente— que Nanda, esta tarde, ha sido el objeto de su visita?

—Sí, de veras… aunque él intentó ocultármelo. Ella lo hace sentirse —prosiguió— tan inocente y bueno.

Durante un momento su compañero se quedó punto en boca; pero finalmente habló:

—Y ella, ¿va a presentarse?

—No tengo la menor idea.

—¿No sabes dónde está?

—Supongo que estará con Tishy, quien ha regresado a Londres.

Vanderbank le dio vueltas a aquello:

—¿Ahora tu sistema es ése: no hacer preguntas?

—¿Por qué *debería* hacerlas… si quiero que la existencia de ella sea lo más parecida posible a la mía? Sencillamente ha llegado la hora, como bien sabes. Desde el momento en que ella *ha* abandonado el piso superior, nuestro único propósito es vivir como amigas. Me parece muy vulgar —suspiró la señora Brook— no tener las mismas consideraciones con los hijos que con las demás personas. Ella no me pregunta nada a *mí*.

—¿Nada? —hizo de eco Vanderbank.

—Nada.

Él volvió a guardar silencio; tras lo cual exclamó:

—¡Es verdaderamente indignante! —Entonces, como ella repitiera estas palabras igual que él había repetido la de ella de un momento atrás, continuó—: ¡Es verdaderamente repugnante!

La señora Brook semejó desconcertada:

—¿Te refieres al hecho de que ella lo ayude?

—No es de Nanda de quien hablo, sino de él. —Vanderbank hablaba con cierta irritación—. Del hecho de que él mantenga cualquier tipo de relación directa con ella. Del hecho de que él la mezcle con sus otros líos granujientos.

La señora Brook examinó aquello con inteligencia y palidez, pero asimismo con perfecto buen humor:

—¡Mi querido amigo, él y sus líos son puras pamemas!

Vanderbank se rió a despecho de sí mismo:

—Y ¿eso mejora en algo las cosas?

La señora Brook reflexionó, mas enseguida recibió una iluminación; casi sonrió al recibirla.

—Sí. Para *nosotros*. —Entonces ella preguntó más afligidamente—: ¿Es que no quieres que se salve Carne?

—¿Por qué habría de quererlo? Me da igual. ¡Al diablo con Carrie!

—Pero lo digo por Fanny —protestó la señora Brook—. Si Carrie es rescatada, será un pretexto de menos para *ella*. —Como durante unos momentos el joven pareciera algo lóbregamente despistado, ella dijo con suave voz trémula—: Supongo que no *quieres* resueltamente que Fanny se fugue.

—¿Que se fugue?

—A estas alturas seguramente no necesito recordarte de qué manera el capitán Dent-Douglas está siempre a la vuelta de la esquina con una silla de posta preparada y cuán firmemente, por nuestro lado, todos luchamos por retener a Fanny.

—Pero ¿por qué no dejarla irse?

Ante esto, la señora Brook hizo gala de un sentimiento más agudo:

—¿«Irse»? ¿Qué sería de nosotros entonces? —Lo invitó a concentrar su errática imaginación—: Ella es la amenidad de nuestras vidas.

—¡Ah! —masculló escépticamente Vanderbank.

—Ella es el adomo de nuestro círculo —insistió su compañera—. ¡Se fugará, no se fugará… no se fugará, se fugará! Se trata de la emoción, todos los días, de deshojar la margarita. —Mientras ella hablaba, la atención de Vanderbank se había concentrado, al otro lado de la habitación, en el señor Longdon; a ella esto le proporcionó una ilustración de cómo acababa de parecerle que se extraviaba la imaginación de él, y en esto ella vio además una razón para salirle con otro asunto—: ¿Es o no es muy rico? —Ella no atenuó en nada el efecto abrupto de esta pregunta.

Vanderbank volvió la mirada hacia ella:

—¿El señor Longdon? No tengo la menor idea.

—¿Ni siquiera después de haberte vuelto tan íntimo suyo? Pues ese punto es, con las personas, la primerísima cosa de la que yo me formo una idea. —Al semblante femenino, durante otra mirada a su anciano amigo, no acudió ninguna crudeza de curiosidad, sino sólo una expresión más dulcemente fantasiosa—: Debe de tener guardada alguna misteriosa arca bajo la cama.

—¿Allá en Suffolk? ¿El típico tesoro escondido de un avaro? ¿Quién sabe? Seguramente —siguió Vanderbank—. No es un avaro, pero me da la impresión de que es un hombre cuidadoso.

Mientras tanto la señora Brook había desentrañado el misterio:

—Eso es porque tiene algo que cuidar: es precisa la existencia de algo realmente sustancioso para inspirar en un hombre así esa clase de celo. Con sus escasos gastos durante estos años, sus ahorros deben de ser inmensos. Y ¿cómo habría podido declararse a mamá a menos que en primer lugar tuviese dinero?

Aunque Vanderbank dudó, asimismo se rió:

—Recordarás que tu madre lo rechazó.

—Ya, pero no por cuestiones materiales.

—Sí, me imagino que la amargura de su fracaso, para él, estuvo en que la razón fue otra.

—Huy, la amargura de su fracaso habría estado en la otra razón exactamente igual que si la otra razón hubiese sido la misma. —La señora Brook se mostraba sagaz, aunque un pelín oscura, y continuó al momento siguiente—: Mamá era tan desprendida. Para ella no significaban nada las riquezas. Eso demuestra que eran inmensas.

—Seguro que no eran tan grandes como tu lógica —sonrió Vanderbank—; ¡pero claro está que si han seguido aumentando desde entonces…!

—Puedo verlas aumentar mientras está sentado ahí —declaró la señora Brook. Pero lo cierto es que su lógica tenía sus propias leyes, y su siguiente transición fue un salto no menos asombroso—: Fue de veras preciosa la sinceridad con que hace un rato admitiste que le produzco escalofríos. ¡Oh, no la estropees con explicaciones! —rogó donosamente—; el señor Longdon no es el primero y no será el último a quien, como suele decirse, no le habré hecho tilín. Lo único que importa es que, si es posible, no quiero empeorar el caso. Conque debes orientarme. ¿*Qué* tiene que hacer servidora?

Ahora nuevamente divertido, Vanderbank la miró gentilmente y contestó:

—Sé tú misma, mi querida amiga. Da rienda suelta a tus estupendos instintos.

—¿Cómo puedes ser —preguntó ella con dulzura— tan vilmente hipócrita? Tan cierto como que estás aquí sentado, sabes que mis estupendos instintos son la cosa que más te aterra de este mundo. ¿«Ser yo misma»? —hizo de eco—. Lo que te *gustaría* decir es: «Sé otra persona: es tu única posibilidad». Muy bien; lo intentaré, lo intentaré.

Él tornó a reírse, moviendo negativamente la cabeza:

—No lo intentes, no lo intentes.

—¿Quieres decir que es completamente inútil? ¿No hay modo de borrar la mala impresión o de producir una buena? —Ante esto él, abandonando su regocijo, encaró la mirada femenina, y por un momento habríase dicho que, quebrando la superficial ligereza de su charla, se sondeaban mutuamente. Ello duró hasta que la señora Brook reanudó la plática—: De verdad que no me gustaría verme privada de él.

Vanderbank pareció comprender por fin y dijo:

—Creo que no te verás privada de él.

—¿Quieres decir que me ayudarás, Van…, lo *harás*? —En ciertos momentos la voz de ella poseía el tono más conmovedor de toda Inglaterra y, humilde, desvalida, afectuosa, hablaba con la confianza de la amistad —. Es por la conciencia del vínculo con mamá —explicó—. Sencillamente el señor Longdon está lleno de ella.

—Sí, lo sé. Es un hombre prodigioso.

—Eso es que te ha contado más cosas; ¿sigue obsesionado con su tema? —preguntó ilusionada la señora Brook.

—Bueno —contestó el joven una pizca evasivamente—, hemos charlado a base de bien, y es el más entrañable niño viejo que imaginarse pueda, y en resumidas cuentas yo lo aprecio.

—Entiendo —dijo benignamente la señora Brook—; y él te aprecia a ti, en correspondencia, tanto como me desprecia *a mí*. Eso lo arregla todo: de alguna forma hace que me alegre mucho por ti. En él hay algo… ¿cómo decirlo?… que evoca al *oncle d'Amérique*, a un benefactor excéntrico, a una hada madrina. Se parece un poco a una viejecita… pero tanto mejor por ello. —Hizo una tregua sólo un instante antes de seguir—: ¿Qué podemos hacerlo hacer por ti?

Ante esto Vanderbank se quedó perplejísimo:

—¿Hacer por mí?

—¿Cómo puede nadie quererte —preguntó ella— sin desear demostrarlo de alguna forma? Ya sabes todas las formas, querido Van —exhaló—, en que yo deseo demostrarlo.

Tal vez él las supiese, según pareció anunciarlo algo súbitamente aparecido en el semblante masculino, pero dichas formas no eran lo que a él, en aquellas palabras femeninas, le había llamado más la atención:

—Ése, por ejemplo, es el tono que no debes adoptar con él.

—¡Helo ahí! —suspiró descorazonada—. Bien, pues entonces *dime* cuál. —Entonces, como él no dijera nada, inquirió—: ¿Debo ser más como mamá?

La expresión de él confesó que se sentía confuso:

—Acaso no te pareces lo suficiente a ella.

—Oh, ya sé que si él me deplora tal como actualmente soy, ella lo habría hecho exactamente igual… de hecho probablemente, al poder verme a fondo, muchísimo más. Ella me habría despreciado aún más que él.

Pero si es cuestión —siguió la señora Brook— de no decir lo que mamá no habría dicho, ¿cómo puedo saber, eh, lo que mamá sí habría dicho? —La señora Brook se volvió tan maravillosa como si advirtiera en el rostro de su amigo alguna reflexión admirativa sobre el exquisito desparpajo cogitativo que (en este respecto tanto como en cualquier otro) ella siempre sabía exhibir—. Naturalmente yo venero a mamá tanto como él, y en ella no había nada que no fuese venerable. Pero no por eso ella dejaba de ser en todos los sentidos una mujer vivaracha, y no sé, al fin y al cabo, ¿verdad?, lo que ni siquiera ella (en la peculiar relación que mantenían) pudo no decirle.

Retomó el regocijo de Vanderbank:

—Muy bien, muy bien. Vuelvo a mi primera idea. Intenta con él cualquier cosa que se te pase por la cabeza. Después de todo eres una mujer de genio, y normalmente el genio se justifica a sí mismo. Quizá el modo de comportarte adecuadamente —prosiguió con placidez e inexorabilidad— sea comportarte inadecuadamente. Puesto que *posees* una simpatía tan grande, confía en ella del todo o no confíes en ella para nada. Eso, seguramente, es lo único que puedes hacer. Por consiguiente, sí, sé tú misma.

Por ambas partes estos comentarios fueron seguidos por la repetición de una mirada recíproca algo más intensa, aunque lo cierto es que los ojos del hablador tuvieron más bien la pinta de defenderse de los de su amiga que de provocarlos.

—Lo que no puedo es ser *tú*, está claro, Van —espetó con tristeza la señora Brook.

—Sé a qué te refieres con eso —comentó él al cabo de un instante—. Te refieres a que soy un hipócrita.

—¿Un hipócrita?

—Soy diplomático y calculador: a él yo no le muestro lo malvado que soy, mientras que de ti él sí sabe lo peor.

De esta observación la señora Brook, cuya mirada volvió a concentrarse en el señor Longdon, no hizo al principio mayor caso que el aparentemente insinuado por el modo en que se tornó meditabunda.

—¿«Calculador»? —recogió por último las palabras masculinas—. ¿Qué cálculos puedes tener que hacer aquí?

—¡Caramba —contestó Vanderbank—, si, tal como acabas de sugerir, él es algo inesperadamente llovido del cielo…! Admito plenamente —siguió— que soy capaz de hacer sacrificios para mantenerme en buenas relaciones con él.

—¿No temes que él llegue a aburrirte?

—Oh, sí… desde luego.

—Y ¿merecerá la pena? En ese caso —dijo la señora Brook, ya que él pareció asentir— es que merecerá enormemente la pena. —Ella continuó observando al señor Longdon, quien, sin sus lentes, miraba fijamente al suelo mientras el señor Cashmore le hablaba. Reanudó la plática, empero, bastante desapasionadamente —: ¡El señor Longdon debe ser de una estrechez de ideas…!

—¡Oh, admirable!

Ella tomó a guardar silencio.

—Yo se las ensancharé —declaró al fin—. *Tú* no.

—¡Dios no lo permita! —convino Vanderbank de todo corazón—. Pero a pesar de eso, como ya he dicho, te ayudaré.

La atención de ella seguía fija:

—Será a él a quien ayudarás. Si vas a hacer sacrificios para mantenerte en buenas relaciones con él, lo primero en ser sacrificado seré yo. —Después, como él dejara sin replicar este comentario tanto rato que por último ella se volvió para mirarlo a él, concluyó—: Estoy perfectamente mentalizada para ello.

Fue como si, bastante jocosamente, él hubiera tenido tiempo de seleccionar la mejor manera de encarar eso:

—¿Qué quieres que te diga? ¡Él amaba a mi madre!

Nada habría podido resultar más insólito que la melancolía de la sorpresa de ella:

—¿A la tuya también?

—No te lo conté el otro día… por razones de delicadeza.

La señora Brookenham reflexionó tenebrosamente:

—*Él* tampoco me lo contó.

—Lo contuvo la misma consideración. Pero si no hablé de ello —continuó Vanderbank— cuando acordé contigo, tras conocerlo aquí durante aquella cena, que vinieras a tomar el té con él en mis habitaciones… si entonces no lo mencioné no fue por haberme enterado sólo tan recientemente.

La señora Brook sondeó esta cuestión más profundamente, pero habló con la exagerada apacibilidad que era la forma que preponderantemente adoptaba su regocijo:

—¡Fue porque por supuesto ello lo caracteriza como un sinvergüenza de aquí te espero! ¿Qué queda de su fidelidad en tal caso?

—¿Al recuerdo de *tu* madre? Oh, no hay motivo de queja: la mantiene celosamente. Tu madre vino después. La mía, tras la muerte de mi padre, lo había rechazado. Pero ya ves que el señor Longdon habría podido ser mi padrastro.

La señora Brookenham asimiló aquello, pero de improviso recibió una iluminación más brillante:

—¡Habría podido ser mi *propio* padre! Además —siguió—, si su costumbre es adorar a las madres, ¿por qué diantres no me adora a *mi*? Yo soy tan madre como la que más.

—Ah, pero en tu caso ¿no recuerdas que tienes una hija? —preguntó Vanderbank con una leve turbación.

La señora Brookenham quedó atónita:

—¿Qué ventaja supone mi hija?

—Caramba, ¿no te lo contó ella misma?

—¿Nanda? Me contó que al señor Longdon ella misma no le agrada más de lo que le agrado yo.

A su vez Vanderbank mostró sorpresa:

—¿Realmente fue eso lo que te dijo?

—A su regreso de tus habitaciones tuvo un acceso de comunicatividad sumamente desacostumbrado, pues por lo general no suele contarme nada.

—A ver —dijo Vanderbank—, ¿qué te dijo exactamente?

La señora Brook se reconcentró y lo rememoró:

—«A mí él me cae muy bien, pero yo no correspondo en absoluto a su idea».

—A su idea ¿de qué?

—Eso mismo le pregunté yo. De cómo debe ser la nieta de mamá.

Vanderbank titubeó, y por último dijo:

—Lo cierto es que no corresponde. —Luego, tras otra pausa, concluyó—: Pero terminará haciéndolo.

Su compañera lo obsequió con una mirada penetrante:

—¿Tú la ayudarás?

Él se puso de pie y, al verlo, el señor Longdon también se incorporó, de tal forma que, desde extremos opuestos de la estancia, ambos intercambiaron uno o dos ademanes amistosos.

—Yo la ayudaré.

XV

La explicación de la anfitriona sobre el motivo del señor Cashmore para no marcharse se vio justificada hasta el punto de que Vanderbank —mientras el señor Longdon se acercaba hasta la señora Brook— pareció no hallar mayor dificultad en enredarse en una distinta conversación con él. Mientras tanto la dama en cuestión había obligado a sentarse junto a ella a su anciano amigo, y su presente método de abordarlo habría interesado a un observador enterado de la desconsolada convicción que ella acababa de estar expresando privadamente. Lo cierto es que algún indicio del atisbo de ello que tuvo el nuevo interlocutor del señor Cashmore habría podido detectarse en la agitación que el deseo de Vanderbank de no interrumpir a la otra pareja no logró desterrar de su propia actitud. Empero, no es que la señora Brook le prestara la menor atención a esto mientras espetaba con celeridad:

—¿Cómo podemos agradecerle lo bastante a usted, mi querido amigo, su extraordinaria gentileza? —La alusión era vivida, y sin embargo el señor Longdon pareció tan desorientado al respecto, que inmediatamente ella hubo de explicarse—: Quiero decir hacia el querido Van, quien nos ha contado cómo le ha proporcionado usted la gran dicha (a menos que él esté horriblemente equivocado) de permitirle conocerlo a usted de veras. Él es tan gran amigo nuestro que nada tan estupendo puede sobrevenirle sin que ello nos afecte de la misma manera a nosotros. —Ella había avanzado con confianza, mas repentinamente se detuvo—: No me diga que él *está* equivocado; yo no sería capaz de soportarlo. —Apeló al pálido anciano con una belleza que de momento resultó absolutamente juvenil—: ¿No está usted permitiéndole conocerlo… de veras?

Fue extraña la sonrisa del señor Longdon:

—Yo no puedo impedírselo. No soy una gran mansión… para dar instrucciones sobre cómo recorrerme. La gentileza es más bien del señor Vanderbank, pues he acaparado, me temo, una gran cantidad de su tiempo.

—Vaya que sí. —La señora Brook no se sintió desalentada—. Durante este último rato él no me ha hablado de otra cosa. Podría usted decir —continuó— que he sido yo quien lo ha incitado a hablar de ello. Y lo cierto es que lo he incitado, pues el placer de él es una alegría para nosotros. Si usted no puede impedir lo que él siente, ya sabe, tampoco puede impedir lo que nosotros sentimos.

Por unos momentos el rostro del señor Longdon reflejó algo que a duras penas él mismo habría podido suponerla a ella lo bastante aguda para percibir: la lucha entre su auténtica desconfianza hacia ella —fundamentada en la inconsciente violencia que la naturaleza de ella infligía sobre todos los recuerdos que él atesoraba de su madre— y su sensación, por otra parte, de que un elevado decoro le exigía apreciarla; impulso éste reforzado por su propio interés en Vanderbank, habida cuenta de que no tenía más remedio que advertir en la pareja una alianza que en Beccles habría sido difícil de explicar.

—Quizá es que no acabo de ver la valía de lo que tu marido y tú y yo estamos en situación de hacer por él.

—¿Quiere decir porque él es tan listo de por sí?

—Pues —dijo el señor Longdon— seguramente eso es lo que hay en el fondo del orgullo que siento de que se haya hecho cargo de mí. Pienso en los jóvenes de *mi* tiempo y me doy cuenta de que él comprende más. Pero eso es lo mismo que hacéis todos —suspiró con algo de desvalimiento—. ¡Sois verdaderamente, verdaderamente portentosos!

Ella le salió al paso con una casi exorbitante ansiedad por salirle al paso justamente por donde él quería:

—Yo no comprendo todo, pero procuro abarcar todo cuanto puedo. En Londres ésa es una tarea difícil hoy día, y muchas veces me siento como una artista de circo, con prendas interiores ajustadas de color rosa y sin faldas de ninguna clase, montando media docena de caballos a la vez. Actualmente todos formamos parte de la *troupe*, supongo —sonrió—, y debemos viajar con el espectáculo. Pero cuando dice usted que

somos diferentes —agregó—, piense, a fin de cuentas, en mamá.

El señor Longdon se quedó mirando atónito:

—Es de ella de quien sois diferentes.

—Ah, pero ella tenía un cerebro deslumbrante. No somos más listos que ella.

Él apartó un momento su honrada mirada consciente y exclamó:

—¡En el momento presente tal vez basta decir que sois más listos que yo! El otro día me alegré mucho —prosiguió— de conocer a tu hija. Esperaba hallarla contigo hoy.

Aunque la señora Brook consideró aquello, fue sólo durante unos pocos segundos.

—Si mi hija hubiera sabido que iba usted a venir —dijo—, habría estado aquí sin falta. Deseaba tanto complacerlo. —Seguidamente, como su visitante no reaccionara ante estas palabras más que para preguntar si Nanda había salido, ella hubo de reconocer esto como una agravante del fracaso; mas al siguiente segundo insistió—: A usted por supuesto le dará igual, pero está entusiasmada con usted.

La verdad es que al principio pareció darle igual:

—¿Es cierto que tiene dieciocho años? —Esto resultó insólitamente abrupto.

—Déjeme pensarlo. ¿No serán más bien veinte? —respondió audazmente la señora Brook. Volvió al ataque—: Me lo contó todo sobre su entrevista con usted. Yo me mantuve al margen adrede: tenía mi intención.

—Y ¿*cuál* era tu intención?

—Pensé que ella le recordaría más a mamá si yo no estaba presente. Pero es una personita que sabe ver. Quizá usted no lo crea, pero ella se dio cuenta.

—Y ¿de qué se dio cuenta? —preguntó el señor Longdon, que no logró, empero, suprimir de su tono una cierta frialdad que de veras despojó de la debida dosis de curiosidad a la pregunta.

La señora Brook no dejó de experimentar el escalofrío de esto, pero siempre tenía a mano su arrojo:

—Caramba, de que ella no le agrada. —Tenía a mano el arrojo de avanzar tanto como el de retroceder —: También ella tiene su pequeño puesto en el circo: es la forma en que aquí nos ganamos el pan.

Por unos momentos el señor Longdon no dijo nada y cuando por último habló fue casi con un aparente ánimo de contradicción:

—Ella es tu madre vuelta a la vida.

Durante tres segundos, su anfitriona lo miró intensamente.

—¡Ah, pero con tan grandes desemejanzas! —exclamó—. Se sentirá desengañado —agregó ejecutando un compasivo ademán de negación.

Él miró exclusivamente hacia Vanderbank:

—Muy bien, mis desengaños son asunto mío. —Después su mirada retomó—: ¿Ella te contó que no me agradaba?

Fue notable la indulgencia de la visión que la señora Brook tuvo de la simpleza del anciano:

—¿Creyó usted haber logrado ocultárselo? No importa: ella puede encajarlo. Creo que en verdad ella opina prácticamente igual que yo: que no importa a cuántos de nosotros odie usted con tal que no varíe usted sus sentimientos hacia mamá. Dejarnos ver eso: es lo único que pedimos.

Nada habría podido contener en mayor medida el bálsamo de la tranquilización, pero aquellas suaves gotas no dieron en el blanco apetecido:

—¿«Dejaros ver»? —¡Oh, cómo pronunció él la expresión!

—Entiendo: usted *no* nos deja ver. ¡Es justamente lo que Nanda percibió que usted pensaba! Pero no puede usted impedir que nosotros lo veamos… de hecho no puede impedir, pienso, que ello influya sobre su propio comportamiento. Usted sería mucho más cruel con nosotros si no fuera por las aún calientes cenizas de su antigua pasión. —Fue una gran lástima que en este momento Vanderbank estuviera demasiado apartado para identificar, para su propia diversión, en el tono hondamente sapiente de la alusión de la señora Brook, gran parte del origen de la expresión del rostro de su anciano amigo. Hasta qué punto la propia habladora realizó esta identificación, es cosa que jamás se sabrá, así como tampoco si cuando ella prosiguió le pareció estar mejorando su propio caso o simplemente arruinando cualquier esperanza—: La ventaja que tenemos es que para usted nunca podremos ser como cualquier otra gente corriente.

—Y ¿cuál es la ventaja que tengo *yo*?

—Huy, usted no tiene nada excepto, me temo, algunas cosas muy pequeñas: tan pequeñas que difícilmente valen la pena de que se moleste en descubrirlas. Nuestro gran contento ante el hecho de que usted haya vuelto con nosotros (aunque sólo sea para echarnos un vistazo y luego abandonamos, en no importa qué consternación, para siempre); nuestra resuelta alegría precisamente ante el hecho de que sea usted tan diferente; el placer que hallamos en hablar sobre usted, y que seguiremos hallando aunque (o

quizá tanto más por ello) a usted lo hayamos conocido sólo para no volver a verlo… independientemente de lo que todas estas cosas representen para nosotros mismos, no nos toca a ninguno de nosotros intentar establecer cuánto o cuán poco lo complacerán a usted. Y, aun así —siguió divagando la señora Brook—, por mucho que podamos decepcionarlo, es inevitable que en nosotros viva alguna pequeña chispa del pasado… pues el pasado es lo único imposible de destruir; el pasado está ahí, ¿no le parece?, para hablar por sí mismo y, si hace falta, sólo *sobre* sí mismo. —Ella calló un instante, pero parecía haber aniquilado cualquier capacidad de reacción en él, de tal forma que mientras aguardaba tuvo tiempo para una nueva inspiración. Acaso podría mencionarse ésta sinceramente como la mejor que en conjunto tuvo—: ¿Logrará usted creerlo una vez que se dé cuenta de que *sé*?

Ella sostuvo la nota tan prolongadamente que al final él contribuyó con un sonido:

—De que sabes ¿el qué?

—Caramba, pues que, comparada con mamá, soy una pobre criatura rastrera. Me refiero —se apresuró a prevenir cualquier protesta puramente cortés que pudiera estorbar su argumentación— a que naturalmente me duele hasta el alma la certidumbre de mi lamentable disimilitud. No es que yo *no* la vea, ¿se da cuenta? Está ahí, evidente por sí misma: la he aceptado impotentemente, pero definitiva y absolutamente. ¿A usted no lo reconfortará *eso*? —suplicó con tamaña ingeniosidad—. Al menos no puedo torturarlo con ningún parecido a ella, por pequeño que fuese. Comprendo perfectamente lo horrible que para usted sería que, con la opinión que se ha formado de mí, yo tuviera los preciosos ojos de ella o su aristocrática nariz o la forma de su frente o el color de su pelo. Por extraño que resulte en una hija, no me parezco ni de lejos, y ¿no le parece que el quedar, así, tan apartada de la cuestión *puede* redimirme un poco ante usted? Claro está —continuó— que para usted el verdadero suplicio es la pobre Nanda… pues en Nanda la disimilitud es tan tremenda como el parecido. ¡Y encima —dijo la señora Brook maravillosamente— *ella* no lo sabe!

Del rostro del señor Longdon, mientras ella hablaba, se había apoderado un extraño rubor pálido y, cualquiera fuese la opinión, como ella había dicho, que él se hubiese formado de ella, en todo caso era patente que ella no lo había desinteresado. Por lo menos ella había cautivado su atención, para bien o para mal; los brillantes ojos de él se hicieron más brillantes y se abrieron en una mirada atónita que por último pareció caracterizarlo como sumergido en las aguas de un puro pasmo. Al final, empero, él volvió a subir a la superficie, y pareció haber dado, en el fondo de aquel mar, con la perla de la peculiar prudencia que necesitaba:

—Me atrevería a decir que seguramente hay algo acertado en lo que tan extraordinariamente sugieres.

Ella se aferró a aquello como presa de un dulce dolor:

—¿En sencillamente desentenderse de mí?…

Pero ante esto él declaró:

—Jamás me desentenderé de ti.

Ello renovó el temor de ella:

—¿Y no únicamente por ser *quien* soy?

Él se levantó de su sitio junto a ella, pero apartando de ella la mirada y con su sonrojo intensificado.

—Jamás me desentenderé de ti —repitió.

—¡Ah, es usted un ángel! —Con mayor presteza ella se incorporó de un salto, y a estas alturas los otros ya se habían puesto en pie—. ¡Lo he logrado, lo he logrado! —exclamó gozosamente para Vanderbank—; el señor Longdon me aprecia, o al menos puede soportarme… le he mostrado el camino; y ya ni siquiera me importa que *diga* que no se lo he mostrado. —Seguidamente se volvió otra vez hacia su anciano amigo—: Podemos solucionar lo de Nanda: no tendrá usted siquiera que verla. Últimamente ha «bajado», pero podemos volver a subirla. En todo caso sabemos cómo deshacemos de ella: *c'est la moindre des choses*.

—¡Palabra de honor, protesto —exclamó el señor Cashmore— contra cualquier medida de esa clase! Os desafío a «deshaceros» de esa señorita sin deshaceros también *de mí*. Soy uno de los grandes admiradores de Nanda —le anunció alegremente al señor Longdon.

Vanderbank no dijo nada, y el señor Longdon semejó dar a entender que habría preferido hacer ídem: la mirada del anciano habría podido ser una apelación a aquél para que interviniera de una u otra manera, para que demostrara una debida familiaridad —nacida con la práctica e inexistente en él mismo— con el arte de la conversación desarrollado hasta tal punto que lo hace a uno capaz de entusiasmar duraderamente a una dama. El silencio de Vanderbank habría podido, de no ir acompañado por su divertido aire deferente, parecer casi inhumano. Al final el pobre señor Longdon hubo de resignarse a hacerlo lo mejor que supo:

—¿Traerás a tu hija a visitarme? —le preguntó a la señora Brookenham.

—Uhmm, uhmm, buena idea; ¿la traerás a visitarme *a mi*? —volvió a intervenir el señor Cashmore.

La señora Brook se había limitado a atalayar al señor Longdon con pinta de experimentar sentimientos

que desafiaban toda expresión. Éstos sólo se concretaban en la exclamación: «¡Es usted un ángel, un ángel!».

—*Yo* no necesito pedirte que me la traigas, ¿verdad? —le dijo seguidamente Vanderbank a su anfitriona —. Espero que no te moleste que me jacte ante propios y ajenos del gran honor que hace poco ella me hizo presentándose completamente sola.

—¿Completamente sola? ¡Caray, señora Brook! —siguió manifestándose el señor Cashmore.

Fue sólo ahora cuando ella le prestó atención a este último; cosa que por cierto hizo simplemente respondiendo a Vanderbank:

—Ella no fue *por ti*, me temo…, aunque por supuesto podría hacerlo; fue porque le habías prometido su presencia al señor Longdon. Pero mi deber es no concederle mayor importancia al hecho de que ella vaya a visitarte (y esperar que ella tampoco se la conceda) que al de que vaya a llevarle una libra de té, como a veces hace, a su antigua nodriza o a leerles a las ancianas del asilo. ¡Ojalá nunca tengas menos de que jactarte!

—¡Me gustaría que viniera a llevarme una libra de té a mí! —retomó la palabra el señor Cashmore—. ¿Acaso para ella yo no tengo bastante de ancianita como para que venga a leerme en casa?

—¿Nanda visita el asilo con frecuencia? —le inquirió el señor Longdon a la señora Brook.

Durante unos instantes esta dama lo tuvo en suspense, el cual tal vez otro par de ojos habría descubierto que era compartido en cierta medida por Vanderbank.

—Todos los viernes a las tres.

Con un repentino giro, Vanderbank se desplazó lentamente hasta una de las ventanas, y ni corto ni perezoso el señor Cashmore tuvo una afortunada remembranza:

—Caramba, pero si hoy es viernes: Nanda ha debido de ir allí. Pero ¿se queda hasta tan tarde?

—Después ella planeaba ir a visitar a la pequeña Aggie: estoy intentando de esa forma, pese a las dificultades —explicó la señora Brook—, volver a unirlas. —Con una novedosa ocurrencia se dirigió al señor Longdon—: Debe usted conocer a la pequeña Aggie, la sobrina de la duquesa; no recuerdo si ya le ha sido presentada la duquesa, pero debe usted conocerla a *ella* también: hay muchísimas cosas en que, estoy segura, convendrá con usted. La pequeña Aggie es única —continuó—; lo entusiasmará; *ella* habría debido ser la nieta de mamá.

—Queridísima amiga, ¿cómo puedes pretender, o compararla siquiera por un momento…? —espetó el señor Cashmore—. La pequeña Aggie no me dice nada en absoluto.

—La pequeña Aggie no le dice nada a nadie —repuso serenamente la señora Brook—; tal es justamente su tipología y su encanto… justamente, sobre todo, su educación. —Luego apeló a Vanderbank—: ¿Acaso el señor Longdon no quedará impresionado ante la pequeña Aggie y no le parecerá interesante charlar acerca de todo ese asunto con la duquesa?

Vanderbank volvió junto a ellos riéndose, pero el señor Longdon usurpó su intervención:

—¿A qué asunto te refieres?

—Huy —dijo la señora Brook—, a la cuestión global, ya sabe, de que las muchachas hagan o no una vida social intensa. La cuestión de que… vaya, ¿cómo suelen llamarlo?… se expongan. Se trata de la cuestión, por lo que parece: la cuestión del futuro; es rematadamente interesante, y en cualquier caso la duquesa es muy aficionada a ella. Desde luego Nanda está expuesta —prosiguió—, y tremendamente.

—Y ¿a qué diantres está expuesta? —requirió alegremente el señor Cashmore.

—¡Está expuesta *a ti*, se diría, mi querido amigo! —Vanderbank habló con cierta perceptible incomodidad no tanto ante el hecho mencionado por él mismo cuanto ante el giro que había tomado la conversación.

Habría podido ser con casi compadecida reprobación de esta nota falsa como lo miró la señora Brookenham. La contestación de ésta a la pregunta del señor Cashmore, no obstante, le fue dirigida al señor Longdon:

—Está expuesta (lo cual es mucho peor) *a mí*. Pero Aggie no está expuesta a nada: nunca lo ha estado y nunca lo estará; y nosotros observamos expectantes para ver si la duquesa logra salir airosa.

—¿Por qué no —preguntó el señor Cashmore—, si no hay nada a lo que Aggie *pueda* estar expuesta salvo a la propia duquesa?

Él había apelado a todos sus acompañantes imparcialmente, pero el señor Longdon, cuya atención estaba ahora enteramente consagrada a su anfitriona, pareció no apercibirse:

—Si todos observáis expectantes, ¿tu idea es que yo deba observar *con* vosotros?

Esta pregunta, en sus labios, fue una ráfaga de aire frío, la conciencia de lo cual movió patentemente a la señora Brook a formular su invitación sobre una base más segura:

—Naturalmente no me refiero al riesgo de que le suceda algo a la querida chiquilla… a quien está claro

que nada puede sucederle excepto que su tía la case expeditivamente en el más breve plazo posible y en las mejores condiciones posibles. No, el interés está, mucho más, en el rumbo que siga la propia duquesa.

—Oh, la duquesa navega en un barco —convino plenamente el señor Cashmore— que precisará ser gobernado con mano firme.

No sería propio del biógrafo del señor Longdon pasar por alto el hecho de que si bien éste no se sintió anormalmente desconcertado, de todos modos sí se sintió visiblemente interesado:

—¿En qué barco navega?

Le había dirigido esta curiosidad, con educación, al señor Cashmore, pero todos quedaron arrobados ante la maravillosa manera en que la señora Brook consiguió sonreír muy sombría, muy tenebrosamente y a la vez hacer que ello los subyugara a todos:

—Creo que deberías explicárselo *tú*, Van.

—¡Dios no lo permita! —Y Vanderbank volvió a alejarse.

—*Yo* se lo explicaré con mucho gusto… si es que me otorgas la venia —dijo el señor Cashmore, para quien manifiestamente cualquier escrúpulo se refería no al tema de la explicación, sino a la presencia de una dama.

—*No* te otorgo la venia, y te ruego que cierres el pico —contestó la señora Brookenham—. ¡Tratas asuntos así con tal minuciosidad!… En resumidas cuentas —le espetó al señor Longdon—, el señor Cashmore sería capaz de contarle a usted mucho más de lo que está usted interesado en saber. *Es* cierto que la duquesa navega en un barco… pero es una experta marinera. *Basta*, como diría ella. ¿Conoce usted a Mitchy? —preguntó inopinadamente la señora Brook.

—Oh, ya lo creo que conoce a Mitchy. —Vanderbank había vuelto a acercarse.

—En ese caso haz que *él* se lo explique. —Ella le presentó esta petición al joven a modo de encantador viraje para todos ellos—. Mitchy *puede* ser exquisito cuando se lo propone.

—¡Oh, cielos… cuando Mitchy «se propone» algo! —exclamó Vanderbank riendo—. Creo preferible, a ese fin, que Mitchy converse con el señor Longdon abandonándose a sus ingénitos impulsos espontáneos.

—Yo *aprecio* al señor Mitchett —dijo el anciano, procurando mirar a su anfitriona directamente a los ojos y hablando un poco como para desafiarla a imputarle, incluso desde el punto de vista de Beccles, una equivocación.

La señora Brookenham aceptó aquello con brillante emoción pletórica:

—¡Mi querido amigo, *vous me rendez la vie*! ¡Si puede tolerar a Mitchy, entonces puede tolerar a cualquiera de nosotros!

—¡Ya lo creo, palabra de honor! —comentó el señor Cashmore con vehemencia—. ¿A qué diantres te refieres —demandó de la señora Brook— diciendo que yo soy más «minucioso» que él?

Ella volvió su belleza un momento hacia este visitante:

—Yo no digo que tú seas más minucioso: digo que él es más brillante. Además, como ya te aclaré antes, tú no eres uno de nosotros. —Dicho lo cual, para poner punto final a la polémica, continuó informando al señor Longdon sin hacer una pausa—: El quid de la retrógrada educación de Aggie es la maravillosa sinceridad con que la duquesa sostiene que la hija propia puede ser perfecta y permanentemente resguardada sin por ello (pues a esto va a parar) privarse una misma…

—Y bien, ¿de qué? —requirió corajudamente el señor Longdon mientras su anfitriona parecía titubear meditativamente.

Ella apeló mudamente a Vanderbank, en quien este gesto suscitó una carcajada:

—¡Te desafío —exclamó él— a especificarlo!

—¡Pero no me desafías *a mí*! —exclamó el señor Cashmore como quiera que la señora Brook se abstuviera de recoger el desafío—. Si conoce usted a Mitchy —prosiguió para el señor Longdon—, debe de conocer también a Petherton.

El anciano permaneció desorientado y nada imperceptiblemente gélido:

—¿Petherton?

—El hermano de mi esposa… al cual, Dios sabe por qué, Mitchy mantiene.

—¿Mantiene? —volvió a hacer de eco el señor Longdon.

Otra vez la señora Brook apeló a Vanderbank:

—Creo que no deberíamos atosigarlo. A usted tal vez yo no le recuerde a mamá —continuó para su anciano compañero—, pero espero no molestarlo si digo cuánto me la recuerda usted a mí. Al fin y al cabo, las explicaciones hacen perder la gracia a las cosas, y si usted *puede* hallamos interesantes y a veces viene a vemos, lo contemplará todo en su salsa. Usted verá, usted sentirá por sí mismo.

El señor Longdon permaneció ante ella pero elevó hacia Vanderbank, cuando ella hubo finalizado, la

mirada que había fijado en la alfombra mientras ella hablaba:

—Entonces, ¿debo marcharme ya? —Las explicaciones, había dicho ella, hacían perder la gracia a las cosas, pero en este instante él fue como un extranjero en una corte oriental, cómicamente desvalido sin su intérprete.

—Si la señora Brook desea no «atosigarlo» a usted —respondió gentilmente Vanderbank—, lo cierto es que tal vez la forma más segura de lograrlo sea sacarlo de aquí. Pero ¿no teníamos la esperanza de que se presentase Nanda?

—¿Nos resultaría provechoso quedamos a aguardarla? —Siguió siendo a su joven amigo a quien el señor Longdon consultó.

—¡Ah, en cuanto ella sale de parranda…! —suspiró la señora Brookenham—. A menos que *la voilà* —dijo cuando se oyó una mano en el picaporte. Se trató únicamente, empero, de un lacayo que entró con una bandejita que, al acercarse a su señora, ofreció a la vista el sobre marrón de un telegrama. De inmediato ella solicitó que la dispensasen a fin de abrir esta misiva, tras la rápida lectura de la cual volvió a alzar la vista hacia todos ellos—: *Es* ella: la hija moderna. «Tishy me invita cenar y ópera; llevo atavío adecuado; retomo indeterminado; por si acaso, llevo llaves casa». ¡No volverá a casa hasta mañana por la mañana! —dijo la señora Brook.

—¡Pero recuerda el consuelo de que lleva las llaves de casa! —exclamó riendo Vanderbank—. Podría ir usted también a la ópera —le dijo al señor Longdon.

—¡Que me aspen si *yo* no voy! —dijo el señor Cashmore.

A causa del mensaje de Nanda el señor Longdon parecía haber recibido una oscura conmoción; en todo caso acogió con visible intensidad la sugerencia de su joven amigo:

—¿Me acompañará usted?

Vanderbank vaciló, recordando algunos compromisos; lo cual le dio a la señora Brook tiempo de intervenir:

—¿No sabe usted vivir sin él? —le preguntó al más maduro de sus amigos.

Vanderbank la miró un instante.

—Creo que puedo pasarme por allí a última hora —le contestó entonces al señor Longdon.

—Creo que *yo* puedo pasarme por allí a primera hora —declaró el señor Cashmore—. La señora Grendon debe de tener un palco; de hecho yo sé cuál, y *ellos* no —continuó jocosamente para su anfitriona.

Mientras tanto la señora Brook le había dado la mano al señor Longdon:

—Bien, de cualquier manera, pronto la chiquilla *irá* a visitarlo a usted. Y sola, desde luego —insistió ella —. Ahórrese las corteses expresiones de protesta: sé muy bien lo que hago.

—Ojalá realmente lo sepas —prorrumpió el insatisfecho señor Cashmore—. ¡Si eso es lo que se consigue por haber conocido a tu madre…!

—Ello no te habría servido de nada *a ti* —replicó la señora Brook—. Y ¿no debería usted decirle que eso es todo lo que puede conseguirse? —se lamentó compasivamente para su otro visitante.

Este último se volvió hacia Vanderbank con extraño semblante desencajado, y Vanderbank dijo:

—¡Vámonos!

LIBRO QUINTO

LA DUQUESA

XVI

Las ventanas del piso bajo de la gran mansión blanca, que se erguía más ancha que alta, daban a una amplia terraza pavimentada con losas, cuyo pretil, una vieja balaustrada de piedra, era interrumpido en mitad de su curso por un tramo de pétreos escalones que descendían a un jardín maravilloso. La terraza presentaba la tonalidad de las primeras horas de la tarde y dominaba limpiamente la perspectiva sobre la cual se alzaba y que la circundaba: la perspectiva —más allá de la serie de jardines— de espléndidos árboles desperdigados y verdes claros de bosque, un horizonte preeminentemente forestal. Nanda Brookenham, un día hacia finales de julio, saliendo del edificio y encontrando el lugar por ahora no ocupado por los demás invitados, permaneció allí un rato con aire de feliz posesión. Se desplazó de un extremo a otro de la terraza, deteniéndose, contemplando su alrededor, degustando con un semblante que transparentaba el placer de una efímera independencia la combinación de cosas encantadoras: de antiguas habitaciones con antiguas decoraciones que resplandecían ensombrecidas a través de las ventanas superiores, de antiguos jardines que se juntaban en ángulo recto en las anchas esquinas de antiguos muros, de senderos silvestres que susurraban con la brisa vespertina y se extendían hacia recónditas lejanías de soledad estival. La escena tenía una expectante quietud que ella estaba demasiado fascinada para desear romper; la contempló, la escuchó, siguió con la mirada las mariposas blancas entre las flores que había a sus pies, por último sufrió un sobresalto al llegarle el chillido de un pavo real desde una alameda inadvertida. Tras unos instantes esto último hizo que ella se pusiera en movimiento con menor disgusto; descendió morosamente los escalones, deambulando sin hacer pausas, echando esporádicamente una mirada atrás hacia la gran mansión brillante pero complaciéndose repetidamente de no ver aparecer a nadie. Aunque el sol seguía bastante en lo alto, ella portaba un quitasol rosa. Atravesó los jardines uno tras otro, bordeando los altos muros que creaban una impresión tan «recoleta» y pensando en cómo, más adelante, madurarían allí las ciruelas y los melocotones. Intercambió un cordial saludo con un jornalero atareado, traspuso una verja abierta y, doblando por esta dirección y por aquélla, finalmente se halló en medio de la hacienda, a considerable distancia de la mansión. Era un punto para llegar hasta el cual había tenido que subir otra pendiente: un lugar caracterizado por un viejo banco verde instalado en aras de un mejor disfrute del panorama que, a lo lejos, donde terminaban los bosques, incluía, de la más inglesa de las maneras, la mancha de color de un antiguo pueblecito rojo y la torre de una antigua iglesia gris. Ella se había dejado caer en el banco casi con una sensación de aventura, aunque no lo bastante palpitante como para dejar de preguntarse si no habría sido una feliz idea traerse un libro; el encanto de lo cual habría estado precisamente en sentir que todo alrededor de ella era demasiado hermoso para dejarla leer.

La sensación de aventura aumentó en ella cuando enseguida reparó en una agitación de la espesura próxima, seguida de la aparición, por un sendero ascendente que pasaba junto a su banco, de un caminante a quien, si no hubiera quedado prontamente despejado el misterio de su peculiar, su excepcional identidad, tal vez la habría fastidiado una pizca tener que identificar como un conocido. Él la vio inmediatamente, se detuvo, rió, saludó con el sombrero, luego subió la cuesta con unas cuantas zancadas y, secándose la frente con el pañuelo, confesando sentirse acalorado, regocijadamente se quedó parado ante ella. La exclamación de ella al verlo aparecer («¡Anda, el señor Van!») había tenido una ambigua brusquedad que más bien había ido dirigida hacia sí misma que hacia su visitante. Ella le hizo sitio en el banco, y al cabo de un momento él ya estaba reposando y ambos brindándose explicaciones. El quid estaba en que él había decidido venir caminando desde la estación a fin de estirar las piernas, dando un largo rodeo, para el goce de la hermosa hora y del placer que ésta ministraba, por un camino que le habían enseñado durante alguna ocasión previa en que se había alojado en Mertle.

—¿O sea que ya habías estado aquí anteriormente? —Nanda, que acababa de llegar tan sólo hacía media hora, habló como si hubiese perdido la oportunidad de ser su guía en una experiencia nueva.

—Ya había estado aquí, sí… pero no invitado por Mitchy, sino por una u otra familia (¿quién demonios eran?) que hace uno o dos años alquiló esta propiedad durante unos meses.

—¿Es que ni siquiera te acuerdas?

Vanderbank caviló y dijo riendo:

—Ya me acordaré. Pero es un encantador indicio de cómo son las relaciones en Londres, ¿verdad?, el hecho de que uno *pueda* ir a visitar de esta forma a la gente y quedar maravillosamente «empachado» y todo eso, y luego marcharse y borrársele la ocasión, olvidar por completo con quién ha quedado en deuda. La vida es extraña.

Por un instante Nanda pareció desear decir que dicha extrañeza era discutible, pero en cambio dijo otra cosa distinta:

—Supongo que un hombre como tú no siente en absoluto que *ha* quedado en deuda: es enormemente amable por su parte (es hacer mucho por cualquier anfitrión) el mero hecho de acudir de visita; conque resultaría intolerablemente gravoso que encima tuviera que acordarse del anfitrión.

—No sé a qué te refieres con eso de un hombre «como yo» —repuso Vanderbank—. Yo no soy ninguna clase especial de hombre. —Ella había estado mirándolo, pero ante esto desvió la mirada, y él continuó bienhumorada y aclaratoriamente—: Si te refieres a que voy de acá para allá sin parar, ¿cómo sabes eso sino debido a que actualmente tú misma estás en todas partes?… así que, sea yo como fuere, en definitiva, tú eres igual de mala.

—Conque reconoces que *estás* en todas partes. Puede que yo sea igual de mala —siguió la muchacha—, pero el quid está en que no soy ni la mitad de buena. Las muchachas son tales burritas de carga: no pueden ser otra cosa.

—Y, si me haces el favor, ¿qué son los individuos que están en las brutales norias de despachos infernalmente atareados? En todo Londres no hay un viejo caballo de carruaje al cual hagan trabajar, te lo aseguro, como a mí. Por lo demás —agregó el joven—, si salgo de casa todas las noches y me voy fuera de Londres los fines de semana como éste, ¿no entiendes, queridita, la razón básica de ello?

Volviendo a dirigir la mirada hacia él, Nanda estudió un momento aquella interrogante:

—¿Debo inferir con deleite que se trata de la dulce esperanza de encontrarte *conmigo*? No es que haya —continuó tras un instante— ninguna necesidad de que digas eso. ¿De qué sirve…? —Pero, impacientemente, dejó inacabada su pregunta.

Él estaba eminentemente alegre incluso aunque su compañera no lo estuviese, y aventuró:

—¿Porque somos tan buenos y viejos amigos que en realidad no necesitamos siquiera hablar? Sí, gracias al cielo, gracias al cielo. —Él había estado mirando en su derredor, contemplando la escena; había depositado en el suelo su sombrero y, completamente a sus anchas, aunque aún más deseoso de dar testimonio de ello, se había cruzado de piernas y brazos—: ¡Qué precioso lugar! Aunque no logre recordar ni por asomo quiénes fueron mis anteriores anfitriones, cuento con el consuelo de estar seguro de que sus mentes se hallan igualmente en blanco. ¿Se acuerdan siquiera de la propiedad que alquilaron? «Invitamos a algunos fulanos a… ¿dónde fue eso, la gran mansión blanca del pasado noviembre?… y hubo uno de ellos, que trabaja en como-demonios-se-llame… *tú* me entiendes… que habría podido ser un sujeto bastante majo si no hubiese presumido tanto de sus dotes». —Vanderbank guardó silencio unos instantes, pero su compañera no comentó nada, así que continuó él—: El hecho de que nosotros dos nos reunamos gracias a tales procedimientos demuestra, ¿verdad?, el inmenso cambio que se ha operado en tu existencia en los últimos tres meses. Me refiero a que, si yo estoy en todas partes como dijiste hace un momento, tú haces exactamente lo mismo.

—Sí; ya ves lo que has conseguido.

—¿Cómo que lo que *he* conseguido?

—Te adentras en los bosques en pos de un cambio, de soledad —dijo la muchacha—, y lo primero que haces es encontrarme acechándote en las profundidades de la floresta. Pero en realidad yo no podía (si reflexionas sobre ello) saber que ibas a venir por este camino.

Vanderbank permaneció allí sentado sin cambiar de postura, mas con un constante meneíllo del pie que mantenía apoyado en tierra, como si todo —sin excluir lo que ella acababa de plantearle— fuera demasiado placentero para reflexionar sobre ello:

—¿Puedo fumarme un cigarrillo?

Nanda guardó silencio un instante; su amigo había sacado su pitillera de plata, que era de gran capacidad, y mientras él extraía un cigarrillo ella extendió la mano diciendo:

—¿Puedo *yo*? —Ella examinó la pitillera con admiración.

Vanderbank vaciló:

—¿Fumas cuando estás con el señor Longdon[14]?

—Sin parar. Pero ¿qué tiene eso que ver?

—Todo, todo. —Él habló con un tenue dejo de impaciencia—. Quiero que obres conmigo exactamente como obras con él.

—¡Huy, eso se dice muy pronto! —replicó la muchacha en un tono peculiar—. ¿Qué es eso de que «obre»?

—Bueno, pues que seas. ¿Qué puedo decir? —Vanderbank caviló plácidamente mientras su pie se mantenía en movimiento—. Que sientas.

Ella prosiguió examinando la pitillera sin, no obstante, servirse del contenido; comentó:

—Creo que, en lo que respecta al señor Longdon y yo, no sabes ni la mitad de lo que imaginas.

Vanderbank se rió y fumó:

—Doy por sentado que él me lo cuenta todo.

—¡Ah, pero apenas des por sentado que yo haga lo mismo! —Durante unos instantes ella frotó su mejilla contra la plata bruñida, volviendo, al momento siguiente, a examinar la pitillera—: Me gustaría tener una de esta clase.

Su compañero bajó la mirada hacia el objeto:

—Caramba, cuenta con capacidad para veinte.

—Pues quiero una con capacidad para veinte.

Vanderbank se limitó a exhalar su humo.

—Tengo tantas ganas de hacerte un regalo —dijo por último— que, en mi alegría por haber dado con uno adecuado, voy a regalarte, como te descuides, o bien eso o bien una pipa.

—¿Te refieres a esta mismísima pitillera?

—La he poseído durante años… pero te regalaré incluso ésta si te gusta.

Ella la retuvo; continuó manoseándola e inquirió:

—Y ¿quién te la regaló a ti?

Ante esto él se volvió hacia ella sonriendo:

—¿Crees que también se me ha olvidado eso?

—Desde luego debe de habérsete olvidado, si estás tan dispuesto a deshacerte de ella.

—Pero ¿cómo sabes que fue un regalo?

—Objetos así siempre lo son: la gente nunca los compra para sí misma.

Ahora ella había soltado el objeto, depositándolo sobre el banco, y Vanderbank se apoderó de él:

—Su origen se pierde en la noche de los tiempos: carece de toda historia excepto haber sido usada por mí. Pero te aseguro que de veras quiero hacerte algún regalo. Nunca te he regalado nada.

Ella permaneció callada un rato.

—¡Menuda exhibición estás haciendo —suspiró por último con seriedad— de tu inconstancia y superficialidad! ¡Y pensar en todas las reliquias tuyas que he atesorado y que en su momento supuse que significaban algo!

—¿Las «reliquias»? ¿Es que guardas un mechón de mi cabello? —Entonces, al comprender a qué se refería ella, espetó—: Oh, ¿quieres decir las cositas navideñas? ¿De veras las has conservado?

—Apartadas en un cajón exclusivo para ellas… envueltas en papel rosa.

—Ya veo adónde quieres ir a parar —dijo Vanderbank—. Tú me has hecho regalos *a mí*, y estás tratando de culparme de haber perdido la dulce conciencia de ello. Pero no lo lograrás. En lo que a mi corazón se refiere, soy un relicario andante. ¿Papel rosa? *Yo* uso papel dorado… y de la más fina y rara calidad: el papel dorado del alma. —Con la uña del dedo él le dio una sacudida a su cigarrillo, y contempló la avivada lumbre; tras lo cual prosiguió muy campechanamente, pero con una delicadeza que por sí sola atenuó el mero humorismo de esta declaración—: No hables, queridita, como si realmente no supieras que soy el mejor amigo que tienes en el mundo. —En cuanto él hubo hablado sacó su reloj, de modo que aunque sus palabras habían ocasionado algo parecido a un silencio este gesto ofreció una excusa para romperlo. Nanda le preguntó la hora y, al contestar él: «Las cinco y cuarto», ella comentó que en ese instante estaría siendo servido el té en la terraza y que todo el mundo habría salido a degustarlo—. ¿Vamos entonces a reunimos con ellos? —demandó su compañero.

Él no había hecho, empero, ningún otro movimiento, y cuando, tras vacilar, ella dijo: «Con mucho gusto», asimismo ello fue sin un cambio de postura.

—Me gusta esto —agregó ella inconsecuentemente.

—También a mí, a más no poder. La terraza —continuó Vanderbank— no está comprendida dentro de «esto». Pero ¿qué invitados han acudido?…

—Huy, todo quisque. Todos los miembros de tu círculo.

—¿Mi círculo? ¿Aún tengo un círculo… pese al absoluto vagamundismo de que me acusas?

—Pues entonces el círculo de Mitchy… quienesquiera que lo compongan.

—¿Y ningún miembro del tuyo?

—Oh sí —dijo Nanda—, mi círculo al completo. Por lo menos, a estas horas ya debe de haber llegado. Mi círculo está integrado por el señor Longdon —aclaró—. Actualmente es el único miembro.

—Entonces ¿dónde diablos encajo yo?

—Huy, tú eres un comparsa. Siempre hay comparsas.

—¿Un círculo completo y encima uno suplementario? —preguntó riendo Vanderbank—. Y entonces ¿qué hay de Tishy?

Encantadora y seria, la muchacha meditó un instante; y dijo:

—Está en París con su madre… de camino hacia Aix-les-Bains[15]. —Luego continuó atropelladamente —: ¿Sabes que eso que has afirmado hace un momento es mucho decir? Me refiero a lo de que eres el mejor amigo que tengo.

—Claro que lo sé, y precisamente por eso lo he afirmado. Ya ves que no me muestro remilgado ni misterioso ni tímido al respecto; lo expongo lisa y llanamente y te desafío a que me contradigas. ¿Quién, si yo no soy tu mejor amigo, es un amigo mejor?

—Pues —contestó Nanda— desde que conozco al señor Longdon me parece que tengo casi el tipo de amigo que eclipsa a todos los demás.

—¿O sea que en el plazo de tres meses él ha adquirido para ti un valor que yo no he alcanzado en todos estos años?

—Sí —respondió—: el valor consistente en que él no me inspira temor.

Sin alzarse del banco, Vanderbank cambió de postura, orientándose más hacia ella apoyando un brazo sobre el respaldo y preguntando:

—Y ¿sí te inspiro temor yo?

—Un temor horrible, monstruoso.

—Entonces, ¿es que nuestras largas relaciones felices…?

—Son precisamente lo que hace que mi terror —espetó ella— sea especialmente abyecto. No importan las relaciones felices. Siempre pienso en ti con miedo.

Él mantuvo el codo sobre el respaldo del asiento, sosteniéndose la cabeza con la mano; y dijo:

—¡Cuán rematadamente curioso… si ello fuese verídico!

Ella había permanecido con la mirada perdida en la dulce lejanía inglesa, pero al oír aquello hizo un gesto:

—¡Quia, señor Van, yo soy «verídica»!

Como quiera que en ningún momento ulterior el propio señor Van habría sabido expresar, ante ningún interesado amigo, el preciso efecto que le causó el tono de aquellas palabras, su cronista se aprovecha de la circunstancia para no pretender estar en posesión de una inteligencia mayor; su cronista se limita, por el contrario, a constatar escuetamente que aquellas palabras causaron en la mejilla del señor Van un sonrojo más bien perceptible.

—Miedo ¿de qué? —inquirió él.

—No sé. El miedo es el miedo.

—Sí, sí…, entiendo. —Él extrajo otro cigarrillo y ocupó un momento en encenderlo; luego dijo—: Pues también la gentileza es la gentileza; eso es todo lo que servidor puede decir.

Él pudo dar unas cuantas chupadas antes de que ella se volviera hacia él preguntando:

—¿Te he herido al decir eso?

Una cierta prolongación del sonrojo masculino apareció en la sonrisa masculina:

—Me parece que me gustaría que me hirieses. Lo que hice un momento atrás fue lograr lo que me proponía —siguió con cierta precipitación—. Te sonsaqué ladinamente sobre la cuestión del señor Longdon. Ése era mi objetivo: ni más ni menos que hacerte desembuchar.

—Pues bien —dijo Nanda, volviendo a apartar la mirada—, el señor Longdon ha entrado en mi vida.

—No habría podido entrar en ninguna otra parte donde me proporcionara mayor satisfacción verlo.

—Pero no le gustó, hace poco, cuando la empleé ante él, esa expresión —replicó la muchacha—. La calificó de «amanerada jerga moderna» y una vez más se extendió sobre la extraordinaria diferencia entre mi forma de hablar y la de mi abuela.

—Es lógico —asintió el joven compasivamente—. Pero a mí me gusta bastante tu forma de hablar. ¿Es que a estas alturas, en lo que a ti respecta —continuó—, el señor Longdon aún no ha franqueado el abismo?

Conmigo ya lo ha hecho.

—Huy, contigo nunca hubo abismo. Tú le agradaste desde el principio.

Vanderbank se sintió asombrado:

—¿Quieres decir que lo manejé así de bien?

—No sé cuán bien lo manejarías, pero llegar a apreciarme ha sido para él un penoso proceso gradual. Creo que ahora sí que me aprecia —declaró Nanda—. Por fin me acepta como disímil: está procurando tratarme sobre esa base. Ha acabado por comprender que cuando me habla de mi abuela ni siquiera logro imaginármela.

Vanderbank exhaló una bocanada:

—*Yo* lo logro.

—Eso mismo dice Mitchy. Pero es probable que ambos os la imaginéis erróneamente.

—No sé —dijo Vanderbank—; le he consagrado a ese asunto una notable cantidad de tiempo. Pero somos de una generación muy distinta. No podemos ser griegos ni aunque queramos.

Ni siquiera esto suscitó en Nanda una carcajada, aunque sí una viva atención:

—¿Llamas griega a mi abuela?

Su compañero se puso en pie lentamente, respondiendo:

—Sí… para concluir elegantemente con ella. —Tomó a consultar su reloj—: ¿Nos vamos? Deseo comprobar si ya han llegado mi criado y mis cosas.

Ella continuó sentada; había un punto sobre el cual quería volver:

—El miedo que te tengo no es superficial. Quiero decir que no es inmediato: no es miedo de ti tal como eres en este momento —aclaró—. Es de un tú futuro y lamentablemente posible.

—Bueno —dijo el joven, sonriéndole—, no olvides que si termina existiendo semejante monstruo, también existirá una tú futura, proporcionalmente evolucionada, capaz de hacerle frente.

Por estar a la sombra, Nanda había cerrado su quitasol, y su mirada se concentró en el agujerito que con la punta había excavado en el suelo:

—¿Quieres decir que ambos habremos progresado?

—Es maravilloso pensar que probablemente habremos progresado juntos.

—Oh, si progresar es cambiar —repuso ella—, no hay ni que pensar en ello: yo nunca cambiaré, siempre seré la misma. La misma amanerada, juerguista, moderna burrita de carga —completó con entera seriedad —. El señor Longdon me ha hecho caer en la cuenta de ello.

Vanderbank se rió estrepitosamente, y en especial ante la seriedad de la muchacha:

—¡Hay que ver qué cosas se te ocurren!

—Es la pura verdad —insistió ella—; tal como soy, así permaneceré. Carezco de lo que suele denominarse tendencia evolutiva. —Haciendo marcas en la tierra con la sombrilla, ella parecía escribir en clave sus propias palabras—. Ya soy todo lo buena que puedo llegar a ser… y todo lo mala. Si el señor Longdon no puede volverme diferente, es que nadie puede.

Vanderbank no pudo menos que hablar con tono de sentirse muy divertido:

—¿Y el señor Longdon ya ha abandonado toda esperanza?

—Sí, aunque no me ha abandonado *a mí*…, por lo menos no del todo. Pero sí la esperanza que en un principio había abrigado.

—Abandona muy rápido: ¡en tres meses!

—Oh, estos tres meses —repuso ella— han sido un largo período: el más pleno, el más trascendental de mi vida, en virtud de lo que ha ocurrido durante ellos. —Siguió hurgando en el suelo; después añadió—: Y todo gracias *a ti*.

—¿A mí? —Vanderbank lo encontraba inconcebible.

—Caramba, por lo que hemos comentado hace un rato: cómo ahora participo en todo y pateo las escalinatas de las mansiones de todo quisque. ¿A que es una atestada hora de vida gloriosa? —preguntó—. Lo que la precedió fue toda una edad, no cabe duda; pero una edad sin nombre.

Vanderbank la contempló un rato en silencio, luego habló asaz digresivamente:

—¡Es sorprendente cómo en ciertos momentos me recuerdas a tu madre!

Ante esto ella se puso en pie:

—¡Ah, helo ahí! Ése es el sambenito que nunca me sacudiré de encima. Es lo mismo, imagino, que siente el señor Longdon.

Habiéndose puesto ambos en pie ahora, como prestos a reunirse con los demás, de todos modos —e incluso una pizca desmañadamente— se quedaron inmóviles. Por cierto que a un espectador habría podido parecerle que algún momento culminante había desembocado, por parte del joven, en cierto estado de

irresolución respecto de si decir alguna cosa especial. ¿Cuáles fueron las palabras que repetidamente pugnaron por acudir a los labios masculinos y que, no obstante, repetidamente no fueron articuladas por los mismos? A nuestro observador se le habría antojado que probablemente no fueron éstas que aun ahora acabaron siendo pronunciadas:

—¿El señor Longdon no te habla tal vez demasiado sobre ti misma?

Nanda lo obsequió con una tenue sonrisa, y lo cierto es que en aquel instante él habría podido proferir una exclamación asombrado ante cierta similitud, una similitud de expresión que era independiente de cualquier cuestión de comportamiento. En opinión de él dicha similitud no se habría visto aminorada, ítem más, por el modo victorioso en que ella suprimió todo indicio de considerar un poco humillante aquella pregunta. El poder evocador que él había mencionado previamente no pudo, empero, al responderle ella, sino ser barrido por una súbita conciencia que él tuvo de su propia indelicadeza.

—Probablemente no se trata tanto de eso cuanto de mi propia forma de seguirle la corriente. —Ella hablaba con una dulzura que a duras penas habría podido ser tan plena sin un cierto esfuerzo—. Entre su paciencia y mi egocentrismo cualquier cosa es posible. No se debe a que el señor Longdon me hable, sino a que me escucha. —En todo caso ella abandonó aquel punto como por deferencia hacia su presente acompañante—: ¿No fuiste tú quien le dijo a mamá que yo debía asistir a las tertulias del salón? A ello me refería con eso de lo que tengo que agradecerte. Es gracias a ti por lo que perpetuamente asisto… gracias a ti y quizá un poco gracias a Mitchy.

—Oh, ha *debido* ser gracias a Mitchy más bien que gracias a mí. —Vanderbank habló con el estilo de seguirle el humor a su compañera acerca de una futesa—. Ese delicioso sujeto que es Mitchy tenía ideas sobre el particular, creo, más acuciantes.

Abandonaron juntos el lugar y al cabo de unos cuantos pasos se apercibieron del acercamiento de uno de los otros invitados: una figura a tan sólo unos metros de distancia, que venía siguiendo la misma senda que tomara Nanda.

—¡Anda, el señor Longdon! —Ahora habló ilusionada.

Al instante Vanderbank le hizo señas con el sombrero mientras exclamaba:

—¡El querido y viejo amigo!

—Entre todos, en cualquier caso —dijo ella con mayor alborozo—, me habéis hecho descender.

Vanderbank no dio ninguna respuesta hasta que se reunieron con su mutuo amigo, momento en que, a guisa de saludo, se limitó a hacerse eco de las palabras de la muchacha:

—Entre todos, se sentirá usted interesado de saberlo, la hemos hecho descender.

El señor Longdon miró de uno a otra, e inquirió:

—¿Qué habéis estado haciendo juntos?

Nanda se adelantó a contestar:

—Simplemente hablando… sentados en un banco.

—¡Bien, yo quiero hablar sentado en un banco! —El anciano exhibió brío.

—Conmigo, como es natural. —Vanderbank acogió ilusionado aquello.

La muchacha no dijo nada, mas el señor Longdon la miró a los ojos y manifestó:

—No: con Nanda. Usted debe sumarse a la concurrencia.

—¡Huy —exclamó riendo su compañero—, ustedes dos son la concurrencia!

—Bueno, pues primero váyase a tomar el té.

Ante esto, desistiendo con una carcajada, Vanderbank le dio al señor Longdon, antes de retirarse, el apretón de manos salutatorio que antes había omitido, gesto tanto más cálido merced al tono de broma con que exclamó al mismo tiempo:

—*Intrigant!*

XVII

Nanda alabó para el señor Longdon el encantador sitio que ella acababa de abandonar, con la consecuencia de que enseguida ambos tomaron renovada posesión del mismo, encontrándose con que la belleza del panorama acrecía conforme avanzaba la tarde y se alargaban las sombras. Los dos convinieron amigablemente sobre este punto, lo cual, sin embargo, no los hizo divagar demasiado, pues al menos uno de los miembros de esta pareja era muy consciente, en este momento, de otros fenómenos distintos de los detalles silvestres y apacibles que permeaban el ambiente.

—Pues bien, necesito que me hables un poco sobre este tipo de visitas —dijo cordialmente el señor Longdon: se había reunido con su joven amiga cargado de un haz de impresiones raudamente recolectadas en la mansión; respecto de lo cual su apelación a ella para que le facilitara una orientación o dos puede tomarse como indicio del grado de confianza que actualmente presidía sus mutuas relaciones. Había terminado por sentirse capacitado, mencionó él mismo, para soportar la mayoría de las novedades; y sin embargo en una situación como la presente no podía menos que retomarle el desconcierto. En el mundo no había más novedades (así había acabado resumiéndose para él el problema) que las que a diestra y siniestra caracterizaban los modales que durante tres meses había estado observando en la alta sociedad. El amplio descarrío global de este estrato social ocupaba sus pensamientos hasta el punto de excluir casi cualquier otro tema, y finalmente se había sentido movido a pensar que incluso en los calmosos tiempos de su propia juventud él debía de haber andado muy a la zaga de sus coetáneos. En su momento (en los años cincuenta y sesenta) no había sido consciente de pasar por anticuado, mas la vida no habría podido dejarlo tan rezagado si la distancia preliminar hubiese sido leve. Así era como, más de una vez, le había explicado la cuestión a la muchacha; lo cual suministra una vislumbre suficiente, es de esperar, del alcance de algunas de sus conversaciones. Por cierto que sus conversaciones siempre concluían dando por sentado un incremento de la actual capacidad de asimilación del señor Longdon; pero eran precisamente estos descansos en la refriega lo que de vez en cuando parecía ser prólogo de una conmoción aún más abrupta. Cuando él se sentía, en resumidas cuentas, como si ya no le quedaran más sorpresas que recibir era cuando le llegaban sus pasmos más mayúsculos. No había tragos más acongojantes que algunos de los que tomaba del cubo que repetidamente había hecho bajar, según imaginaba él, hasta lo más hondo del pozo—. Es que este súbito allanamiento de la mansión de alguien (sabe Dios quién) y nuestra invasión de ella como si fuéramos una plaga de langostas… Supongo que uno no tiene derecho a censurarlo cuando uno forma, casi con el mismo grado de culpabilidad, parte de los avasalladores; pero ¿de qué estará hecha la gente cuando consiente, nada más que por dinero, la violación de sus hogares?

Nanda caviló; experimentó la sensación de que él la hacía reflexionar intensamente.

—Pero ¿es que los ingleses no se han dedicado desde siempre a alquilar sus residencias? —replicó la muchacha.

—¿Quieres decir que si somos una nación de mercachifles ello no puede remontarse, en la escala en que lo demostramos actualmente, a hace sólo una semana? Sin duda, sin duda, y cuanto más se piensa en ello, más obvio parece que la alta sociedad (pues nosotros vivimos *dentro* de la alta sociedad, ¿no es cierto?, y ése es nuestro horizonte) jamás puede haber sido más que crecientemente vulgar. El quid está en que en la noche de los tiempos (y yo pertenezco, como ves, a la noche) la alta sociedad había evidenciado mucho menos lo vulgar que *podía* ser. Sus miembros hacían lo que podían para ser vulgares, muy probablemente, pero se topaban con muchísimas supersticiones que tenían que respetar. Han ido tirándolas por la borda una tras otra, de tal modo que actualmente el barco navega desacostumbradamente ligero. Así es como —y el anciano, fijos los ojos en la dorada lejanía, ingeniosamente prosiguió su razonamiento hasta el final— percibo yo los bandazos y cabeceos. Si yo no fuese un marinero francamente bueno…; aunque, tal como están las cosas, querida —se interrumpió con una carcajada—, bastante a menudo te muestro cómo he de

asirme para no perder el equilibrio. —Jadeó tenuemente, en parte divertido y en parte angustiado, y luego se recuperó abruptamente haciendo una pregunta—: ¿A quién pertenece esta propiedad a fin de cuentas?

—Me avergüenzo horrores, pero el caso es que mucho me temo que lo ignoro. Ese mismo problema se le planteó aquí hace un ratito —siguió la muchacha— al señor Van.

El señor Longdon pareció meditar unos instantes, e inquirió:

—Oh, ¿dices que se le planteó? ¿Y el señor Van no fue capaz de contestar?

—Se le había olvidado por completo… aunque ya había estado aquí otra vez. Naturalmente debió de venir invitado por otros distintos avasalladores —agregó a modo de circunstancia atenuante—. Quiero decir que ellos no eran los auténticos propietarios más de lo que pueda serlo Mitchy.

—Entiendo. También ellos se habían limitado a mudarse aquí transitoriamente.

Nanda concluyó aquella sencilla historia:

—Hoy es Mitchy quien se ha mudado, y creo que a decir verdad fue nada más que ayer cuando se mudó. Se ha traído a su círculo, y henos aquí.

—¡Henos aquí, henos aquí! —hizo de eco su amigo con mayor seriedad—. ¡Pues bien, todo esto es espléndido!

Como ante una entonación peculiar en la voz masculina, la mirada de la muchacha, mientras la del anciano continuaba errática, lo atalayó exclusivamente a él:

—¿No le parece que todo esto es verdaderamente apasionante? Todo está dispuesto, el festín ha sido desplegado, y, sin nada que agite nuestras conciencias excepto la imprecisa sensación de que habrá personas y cosas, ocupamos cómodamente nuestros puestos. —Él no respondió nada, aunque por lo visto aquella descripción no lo había dejado indiferente—. *Hay* personas, *hay* cosas, y en generosa abundancia. Cuando usted se encaminó hacia este paraje, ¿ya habían hecho acto de presencia todos los invitados? —preguntó ella viendo que seguía callado.

—Creo que sí. En la terraza había varias damas y caballeros que no conocía. Pero yo sólo te buscaba a ti y seguí este rumbo por indicación de tu madre.

—Y ¿ella le pidió que si me encontraba en compañía del señor Van, usted lo hiciera ir a reunirse con ella?

Ante esto el señor Longdon reaccionó con cierta demora pero sin hacer ningún aspaviento:

—¿Cómo podía ella suponer que él estuviera aquí?

—¿Teniendo en cuenta que él aún no había hecho acto de presencia en la mansión? ¡Oh, eso es algo que siempre me ha asombrado: las cosas que mamá supone! Ya veo que sí se lo pidió —observó Nanda.

Al oír esto, su anciano amigo se volvió hacia ella:

—Pero no fue por eso por lo que me deshice de él.

Nanda vaciló, pero dijo:

—Ya: usted no toma en cuenta todo lo que dice mamá.

—Yo no tomo en cuenta «todo» lo que dice nadie… ni siquiera, querida, cuando quien lo dice eres tú.

De nuevo ella guardó silencio un instante.

—¿Ni siquiera cuando quien lo dice es el señor Van? —sugirió por último.

El señor Longdon reflexionó sinceramente:

—Oh, yo hago caso de aseveraciones suyas de todas las índoles.

—En tal caso eso demuestra la importancia que tienen para usted. ¿*Él* se parece a su propia abuela? —continuó la muchacha. Entonces, como su compañero semejara confundido, inquirió—: ¿Usted no había conocido también a la abuela de él?

Él ofreció una sonrisa maravillosa:

—A su madre. —Ella profirió una exclamación, sonrojándose, a cuenta de aquella metedura de pata; y él agregó—: No soy tan sumamente perverso. Pero ninguno de vosotros dos os parecéis a ellas.

—¿Es que no era guapa la madre de él? —inquirió Nanda.

—Muy hermosa. Pero eso no tiene la menor significación. A él, hoy día, ella misma no sería capaz de reconocerlo.

Se quedó ligeramente boquiabierta:

—¿Su propia madre no sería capaz de…?

Fue casi brusco el ademán negativo que él realizó con la cabeza:

—No; ni él a ella. Hay un eslabón perdido. —Luego, como si al fin y al cabo ella pudiera tomárselo demasiado seriamente, él moralizó con mayor dulzura—: Claro está que fui yo el que perdí el eslabón durante mi letargo. He estado durmiendo medio siglo: soy Rip Van Winkle. —Un instante después, volvió sobre la pregunta de la muchacha—: Con todo y eso, él no se parece a su madre.

Nanda le dio vueltas a aquello:

—Quizá hoy día usted no la tendría en tan alta consideración.

—Quizá no. En todo caso fue exclusivamente mía la idea de separarte del señor Vanderbank.

—Yo no lo interpretaba —dijo Nanda— como que me hubiese usted separado. Lo interpretaba como que era usted mismo quien se había separado de él.

—¿Yo habría podido enviarte *a ti* a la mansión? Vaya —respondió el señor Longdon—, es que creo que cada vez administro mis placeres con mayor sentido económico. Cada vez más los abordo de uno en uno: procuro sacar de cada uno de ellos el mayor jugo posible.

—¿Conque en la actualidad está sacando el mayor jugo posible de *mi*?

—El mayor posible, querida, el mayor posible. —Él contempló un rato la enrojecida lejanía, después exclamó suavemente—: ¡Todo esto es, como dijiste hace un momento, apasionante! Y sin embargo me hace desear —y otra vez él se volvió abrupto—, tal como ya te he manifestado alguna que otra vez, que vinieras a visitar *mi* propiedad. Y no precisamente para sumergimos aún más en el barullo.

La muchacha compartió sentada en el banco lo que contemplaba el anciano:

—¿Llama usted a *esto* un barullo?

Él titubeó:

—Tú misma lo has calificado como algo apasionante. Naturalmente ya te ocuparás de establecer uno de tus refinados distingos, pero yo lo califico, a mi tosco modo, como una vorágine. Aquí no se hace otra cosa que dar vueltas y más vueltas. —En un santiamén él se había cruzado de brazos con la misma tiesura de Vanderbank un rato antes; en un santiamén asimismo ya estaba agitando el pie nerviosamente—. Paz, paz; si nos mantenemos sentados podremos resistirlo. Pero para recobrar la serenidad ven a visitar Suffolk.

—¿Quiere eso decir que puedo ir sola?

—No pienso acogerte, te lo aseguro, más que sobre esa premisa. Quiero enseñarte —insistió— lo que la vida *puede* ofrecer. Por supuesto no —agregó— en el sentido del presente tipo de cosas.

—No, claro: acaba usted de decírmelo. En el sentido de paz.

—De paz —dijo el señor Longdon—. Oh, no puedes imaginártelo, no tienes ni la menor idea. Es precisamente la razón de que quiera yo enseñártelo.

Nanda dio la impresión de ser capaz de ver ya aquello desde lejos:

—Pero ¿habrá paz si yo estoy presente allí? Quiero decir para *usted* —completó.

—No es cuestión de «mí». Las tortillas de todo hijo de vecino se hacen cascando huevos ajenos. Por lo demás, creo que cuando estemos juntos en soledad…

Él calló durante tanto rato que ella se sintió intrigada:

—¿Y bien? ¿Qué pasará cuando lo estemos?

—Caramba, pues que todo irá bien —concluyó él con llaneza—. Templos de paz, solían denominarlos los antiguos. Nosotros edificaremos uno, y yo seré como mínimo el guardián. Tú podrás acudir siempre que quieras.

Ella se le confió con su silencio más de lo que habría podido hacerlo con palabras.

—¿Lo ha acordado usted con mamá? —inquirió, empero, por último.

—Lo he acordado todo.

—¿*Ella* no deseará acompañarme?

A su amigo la risa lo hizo volverse hacia ella:

—No te preocupes. Hay asuntos en los cuales tu madre confía en mí.

—Pero otros en los cuales no.

Ante esto sus miradas se encontraron durante un rato fugaz, y ello concluyó con que él dijo:

—Pues entonces debes ayudarme. —Aunque sin apocarse, Nanda desvió la mirada; y el señor Longdon, como para sellar mediante un aire de intrascendencia su mutuo entendimiento, pasó a otra materia—: El señor Mitchett es el más opíparo de los anfitriones.

—¿Será que se muestra tan rumboso con algún propósito determinado? ¿Sospecha usted qué se propone? —insistió Nanda—. Él dice, de la más extraordinaria de las maneras, que lo hace todo *por mí*.

—¿Alquila esta gran propiedad y la llena de sirvientes e invitados…?

—Sí: tan sólo para que yo pueda venir de visita un fin de semana o dos. Claro está que sólo la ha alquilado por tres o cuatro semanas, pero incluso ese período es un bonito piropo. No le concede importancia a lo que hace. Es su forma de divertirse. Se divierte a nuestra costa —siguió la muchacha.

—¡Pues espero que eso lo compense, querida, por el grado hasta el cual nosotros nos divertimos a la suya!

—La diversión de él —dijo Nanda— consiste en vemos comprobar que está dispuesto a cumplir todo lo

que dice.

El señor Longdon reflexionó unos instantes.

—En verdad, hija mía, eres sumamente aguda.

—¡Oh, no he observado la vida en balde! Mitchy no le concede importancia —repitió.

Su compañero semejó dividido entre un deseo de saber más y un cierto temor a alentarla.

—¿A qué no le concede importancia? —preguntó al fin.

Ella reflexionó un instante, sin abandonar su seriedad, y ello muy bien pudo ahondar la impresión del señor Longdon de que la muchacha era penetrante.

—Pues a sí mismo. Quiero decir a su dinero. A cualquier cosa que pueda pensar nadie. A Lord Petherton, sin ir más lejos, en absoluto. Lord Petherton cree haberle abierto muchas puertas… cree, es decir, que Mitchy lo cree. Pero Mitchy se divierte a costa de *él* más que de ningún otro. Los obnubila a todos.

—¿A todos menos a ti?

—Oh, yo lo aprecio.

—¡Mi pobre muchacha, eres de una perspicacia inaudita! —se lamentó el señor Longdon.

Él había hablado casi con disgusto, pero ella no se sintió lo bastante alarmada como para no continuar siendo clara:

—Y él me aprecia a mí, y sé cuánto; y también cuán poco. Es el hombre más generoso del mundo. Lo complace poder sentirse indiferente y munífico: eso lo compensa por tantas y tantas cosas. —El anciano escuchaba con atención, y su joven amiga, consciente de ello, siguió como sobre un terreno del cual conocía cada palmo—: Es hijo, como ya sabe usted, de un gran fabricante de calzados («abastecedor de todas las Cortes de Europa») que le dejó una gran fortuna, que había sido amasada, creo, por muy extraordinario que parezca, también a base de especulaciones inmobiliarias.

—Oh sí, ya lo sé. ¡Es asombroso! —suspiró su compañero.

—¿Es asombroso que él provenga de tal extracción?

—Caramba, es asombroso todo. Que estés hablando de esta forma…, que hayas «observado la vida», como tú dices, hasta tales extremos. Que cualquiera de nosotros esté aquí…, especialmente que esté aquí el señor Mitchett. Que la hija de tu abuela haya traído a su hija…

—…¿a visitar a una persona —Nanda recogió sus palabras toda vez que, aparentemente por delicadeza, él se había callado bruscamente— cuyo padre solía tomarle las medidas, de rodillas sobre un diminuto felpudo, al notablemente voluminoso pie de mi abuelo, como dice mamá? Sí, a ninguno de nosotros le importa eso. ¿Cree usted que debería importamos? —preguntó Nanda.

El señor Longdon le dio vueltas a aquello:

—Voy a contestarte con una pregunta. ¿Te casarías con él?

—Jamás. —Después, como para demostrar que su tierno acento no ocultaba ninguna flaqueza, reiteró—: Jamás, jamás, jamás.

—Y, aun así, supongo que sabes… —Pero una vez más el señor Longdon dudó; sus escrúpulos salieron a la superficie—: ¿Te molesta que yo hable sobre ello?

—¿Sobre que él cree querer casarse conmigo? Qué va. Me complace enormemente decirle a usted que todo ello es agua de borrajas.

—¿Incluso por parte *de él*?

Nanda reflexionó; y respondió:

—Sí, desde el momento en que él se siente aliviado por haber averiguado, gracias a conversaciones y detalles (pues, si no, no se lo habría creído), que sí lo aprecio. Yo no habría acudido aquí si no lo apreciase.

—¿Ni siquiera por ningún otro aliciente distinto? —inquirió con seriedad el señor Longdon.

—¿Quiere decir ni siquiera porque *usted* iba a estar aquí?

Él titubeó:

—Yo y otras personas.

De algún modo ella demostró no estar dispuesta a amilanarse:

—Usted no fue invitado hasta que él se aseguró de que yo acudiría. Nos hemos convertido usted y yo —sonrió— en una de esas parejas a cuyos componentes siempre se los invita juntos.

Ésas eran parejas, según pareció deducirse de la especulativa mirada masculina, de las cuales él nunca había oído hablar, y si él las estudió mentalmente unos instantes fue sólo para olvidarlas con presteza:

—Me parece que no expresas la coyuntura con la suficiente vividez, ya me entiendes.

—¿Que Mitchy *ha* sufrido un duro golpe sentimental? Él mismo la expresa con tal vividez que seguramente basta y sobra para reparar cualquier omisión mía. Yo formo parte de lo que acabo de decirle hace un rato: de su indiferencia y su munificencia. Es como si él sólo pudiera tolerarse hacer cosas no

vulgares. Podría perfectamente casarse con la hija de un duque, pero eso *sería* vulgar: sería el ideal y la necesidad absolutos de nueve de cada diez hijos de zapatero vueltos ambiciosos por la fortuna. Mitchy se dice: «No; yo tengo mi propia línea de conducta; yo quiero casarme con una pordiosera». Y es únicamente porque soy una pordiosera por lo que me ama.

—Pero hay muchísimas otras pordioseras —objetó el señor Longdon.

—Oh, reconozco que yo soy la que menos lo asquea. Pero si yo tuviera algún dinero —insistió Nanda— o fuese realmente hermosa (pues hoy día eso, la belleza genuina, cuenta tanto como ser hija de un duque), él ni se me acercaría. Y creo que con eso está todo dicho. Aparte, él debe casarse con Aggie. También ella es una pordiosera… así como un ángel; de modo que cumple los requisitos.

El señor Longdon se quedó mirando pasmado, pero incluso en su asombro pareció extraer de la agilidad con que ella lo había hecho recorrer el problema una cierta sonrisa de placer:

—¿A «Aggie» le agrada él?

—A ella le agrada todo el mundo. Como digo, es un ángel… pero de los de verdad. Por consiguiente el hombre más amable del mundo es el marido adecuado para ella. Si Mitchy quiere hacer algo absolutamente hermoso —declaró ella con la misma elevada sabiduría—, pues entonces que la rescate de su situación, la cual es horrorosa.

El señor Longdon se puso más serio:

—¿En qué sentido es horrorosa?

—Caray, ¿no está usted al tanto? —Ahora la mirada masculina fue lo bastante gélida para infundirle a ella, en su escalofrío, una turbada sensación de que lo disgustaría menos recurriendo a una elegante liviandad—: La duquesa y Lord Petherton son como usted y yo.

—¿Se trata de un acertijo? —Él se mostró de veras serio.

—Son una de esas parejas a cuyos componentes siempre se los invita juntos. —Pero el semblante del señor Longdon reflejó tan escaso triunfo de la liviandad femenina que fue en un tono distinto como seguidamente ella agregó—: Lo cierto es que Mitchy no habría debido invitarlos juntos. —En silencio, su amigo fijó la mirada en el suelo: una actitud en que hubo algo que la hizo inflamarse—: Pero claro está que, con lo amable que es Mitchy, apenas podemos caracterizarlo como riguroso. Tiene sus peculiares ideas: piensa que todo da igual. Dice que todos hemos llegado hasta tales extremos que es el acabóse.

El señor Longdon enmudeció durante un rato, y cuando al final alzó los ojos fue sin encarar los de Nanda y con cierta sequedad de modales:

—¿El acabóse? No es difícil compartir esa impresión.

Otra vez el anciano enmudeció, y entre ellos se produjo un silencio de alguna duración, acogido por Nanda con una intranquila inmovilidad que a un espectador habría podido conmoverlo observar. Permaneció allí sentada como aguardando alguna señal ulterior, deseando únicamente no disgustar a su amigo, mas incapaz de interpretar un papel y obviamente agobiada por algo que ya era demasiado tarde para revocar, algo vislumbrado cuando por primera vez ella había asumido que de su mutua relación acabaría surgiendo un entendimiento tácito.

—Me atrevería a decir —dijo al final— que realizo observaciones que a usted no le gustan. Pero siempre se me olvida.

Él guardó silencio un momento más, después se volvió hacia ella con una mirada que resultó un tanto extraña debido al hecho de que se la dirigiera por encima de los lentes. Fue una mirada aún más severa que la precedente:

—¿Qué es lo que siempre se te olvida?

Tras un instante ella esbozó una tenue, débil sonrisa que parecía hablar de desvalimiento y que, cuando en contadas ocasiones asomaba en su rostro, resultaba elocuente a tenor de la decidida ausencia de apocamiento exterior que por lo general había en la pinta de la muchacha.

—Pues… no lo sé —contestó. Era como si a veces la realidad se volviera tan complicada que (en lo tocante a ayudar a que los demás comprendieran) ella no pudiese sino rendirse.

—Espero que no creas que deseo que seas ante mí como no serías (por así decirlo) ante ti misma. Espero que no creas que no deseo que seas franca. ¡Si intentases *aparentar* algo ante mí…! —Se calló con una nota de sencilla tristeza; aquello, por lo pronto, no se parecería nada a lo que a él le gustaría.

—¿Algo diferente, quiere decir, de lo que en realidad soy? Lo mismo he pensado yo desde el principio. Uno es ni más ni menos que lo que uno es, ¿no le parece? No hablo tanto —prosiguió ella— del carácter o del temperamento (pues éstos deben ser, ¿verdad?, lo que se denomina «debidamente controlados») cuanto de la mente y lo que uno discierne y opina y el tipo de cosas que percibe. —Nanda guardó silencio un instante; después espetó llanamente pero con algo de heroísmo—: ¡Helo ahí!

Con visible intensidad el señor Longdon meditó sobre aquello:

—Lo que insinúas, ¿es que las características de tu conversación dependen de las demás personas que te rodean?

—Vaya, no todo el mundo es tan admirable como usted. —Nanda le salió al paso con prontitud, pero no bien hubo hablado pareció haberse topado nuevamente con una dificultad—: Pero he ahí el mismísimo hecho de que yo diga incluso esto último. ¡Oh, de qué manera me doy cuenta (como ya le he dicho en otras ocasiones) cada vez que me muestro disímil! Me es imposible preguntarle a usted las cosas que mi abuela sí habría dicho, porque eso sería sencillamente tratar de camuflarme ante usted, y por lo tanto mostrarme deshonesta y ladina, cosa que naturalmente usted no desea, ni yo tampoco. Y sin embargo cuando digo las cosas que mi abuela no habría dicho, entonces le muestro a usted excesivamente (excesivamente como para que le agrade) lo que sé y veo y pienso. Aunque las dos fuésemos parcialmente resultado de las demás personas, las demás personas de *ella* eran muy diferentes. —La audacia vulnerable de la muchacha sostenía su discurso, y en ella había algo que reclamaba benevolencia—. Y, no obstante, si ella lo tenía a usted, igualmente lo tengo yo. Es la adulación de frases como ésta, o su sonido, lo sé muy bien, lo que no debe de parecerse en nada a mi abuela. Por supuesto, más bien se parece a mamá; aun así, no es como si usted no me hubiese hecho ya notar (¿verdad?) que en realidad usted no me considera igualita que mi abuela. —De nuevo ella calló un rato, como para discurrir el mejor modo de razonar con él; y de nuevo, por el momento, él no ofreció ninguna señal. Ella volvió a inflamarse con su insólita diafanidad implacable—: Mi abuela no era el tipo de muchacha que ella era *incapaz* de ser… y lo mismo me ocurre a mí.

Mientras ella hablaba, el señor Longdon había caído en algo que habría podido interpretarse como una transitoria sumisión voluntaria a ella: había descruzado las nerviosas piernas y, extendiéndolas del todo juntando los pies, había permanecido sentado mirando intensamente hacia adelante, con la barbilla sumida en el pecho y con las manos, raudamente entrelazadas, haciendo dar vueltas ociosamente a los pulgares. Así siguió durante un lapso que habría podido facultar a su joven amiga para sentir que se había congraciado con él tanto como antes había caído en desgracia ante él. Él acaparaba la atención femenina, igual que previamente ella había acaparado la masculina, pero mientras ahora él se limitaba a mirar contemplativamente y pensar, ella lo escudriñó con una discreta ansiedad que casi habría podido caracterizarlo como un querido pariente a quien ella supusiera indispuesto. Al cabo él lanzó una mirada en derredor y luego ella, obedeciendo algún impulso que había cobrado fuerza en su interior mientras estaban callados, le ofreció la misma delicada mano que le habría ofrecido a un niño enfermo. Habían estado hablando de franqueza, pero en este caso ella mostró una clase de franqueza que lo hizo ruborizarse visiblemente. A su vez debido a ello, empero, él no hizo sino reaccionar aún más vehementemente, cogiéndole la mano y sosteniéndosela, reteniéndola un largo instante durante el cual se encontraron sus miradas y pareció despejarse algo que habría sido demasiado oscuro para aclararlo por medio de palabras.

—¡Me gustaría inmensamente que te casaras! —exclamó él finalmente como si, aunque de hecho fuera en eso en lo que él había estado pensando, el gesto de ella hubiese sido lo que lo hubiese animado a concebir ese anhelo.

El tono masculino delató una intencionalidad tan especial que aquellas palabras sonaron a algo inesperado; mas en el semblante de Nanda había siempre ese extraño aplomo de las jóvenes que han desaprendido a sorprenderse y cultivan taimadamente el hábito, en sociedad, de no despertar sospechas sobre su propia ingenuidad y no pestañear ante lo que diga nadie.

—¿Cómo *podría* casarme? —preguntó ella, aunque pareciendo más bien aceptar la propuesta que desecharla.

—¿No puedes, no *puedes*? —Él habló acuciantemente y siguió reteniéndole la mano. Ella hizo un gesto negativo con la cabeza lentamente, marcadamente; ante lo cual él insistió—: No le haces justicia al señor Mitchy. —Ella no dijo nada, mas su mirada fue vivida, y eso lo hizo compendiar—: ¿Imposible?

—Imposible.

Ante esto, desasiéndola, el señor Longdon se puso en pie; sacó su reloj:

—Debemos regresar. —Ella se había incorporado al mismo tiempo que él, y permanecieron allí de pie cara a cara en la semidesvanecida luz mientras él volvía a guardarse el reloj—. Bueno, eso no me hace desear menos tu casamiento.

—Es encantador por su parte desearlo, pero seré una de esas personas que no se casan. Y al cabo seré —dijo Nanda— una de esas personas que nunca se casaron.

—No, hija mía —replicó él gravemente—; jamás serás algo tan triste.

—¿Por qué no… si usted lo *ha* sido?

Él la escudriñó algunos instantes, calladamente; después, extendiendo la mano, pasó la de ella por

debajo de su propio brazo:

—Precisamente porque lo he sido.

XVIII

—¿Tendría usted —le dijo la duquesa al señor Longdon al día siguiente— la increíble amabilidad de hacerse cargo de mi pobre sobrinita durante cinco minutos? —Estas palabras fueron pronunciadas en tono de encantadora súplica cuando él salía de la mansión a una hora avanzada de la tarde del domingo (la segunda tarde de su estancia, que finalizaría a la mañana siguiente) y al encontrarse con la habladora en uno de los extremos de la amplia terraza fresca. En este punto había un tramo de escalones secundario por el cual ella acababa de subir procedente de los terrenos, siendo por lo visto uno de sus propósitos dar renovado testimonio de esa ansiosa vigilancia de la pequeña Aggie de la cual había tolerado momentáneamente verse apartada. Dicha jovencita, acomodada a la placentera sombra y sobre un sofá de construcción ligera diseñado para el aire libre, ofrecía la imagen de una indolencia cuyo hechizo sería de discutible gusto romper. Se trataba de esa hermosa hora en que, a la caída de las más venturosas tardes estivales, lugares como la gran terraza de Mertle evocan en la imaginación un salón de banquetes abandonado: abandonado por la concurrencia recientemente congregada para tomar el té y ahora diseminada (de acuerdo con afinidades y combinaciones prontamente sentidas y acaso igual de prontamente criticadas) tanto por aposentos más sosegados donde la intimidad podría ahondarse como por parques y bajo árboles donde la quietud no desconocía el entrechocar de bolas y el buen humor de juegos. Había habido sillas desperdigadas por la terraza; encima del pretil seguía habiendo tazas sin recoger; de hecho los sirvientes, a la manera de una «tripulación» convocada por un silbido sobre la cubierta de un barco, acababan de aparecer para poner las cosas en un orden que no tardaría en volver a ser alterado. Más abajo se veían parejas dispersas y un perezoso grupo sobre la hierba, dentro del cual, a despecho de la ociosidad, a veces alguien se volvía lo bastante vehemente para exclamar: «¡Descalificado!». Aún era intensa la luz solar, pero ya con esa presciencia del lánguido fulgor dorado en que el polífono graznido de las cornejas sonaría a la vez benévolo y triste. Por todas partes había muchas cosas que percibir y que contemplar, mas la pequeña Aggie tenía la vista fija en un libro sobre el que su hermosa cabeza se inclinaba con una docilidad visible incluso desde lejos—. Allá junto al lago se ha quedado un amigo aguardándome —siguió la duquesa— y me dirijo a mi habitación a por una carta que le he prometido enseñarle. Enseguida bajo con ella, o sea que dentro de unos minutos estaré en condiciones de relevarlo a usted. Nunca dejo sola a mi sobrina mucho tiempo: es algo que nunca debe hacerse, ya sabe, en una residencia campestre llena de invitados, con una niña de esa edad. Por lo demás —y la interlocutora del señor Longdon se volvió aún más confidencial—, me muero de ganas de que usted la conozca. Usted, *par exemple*, usted es lo que me *gustaría* ofrecerle a mi niña. —El señor Longdon miró a la duquesa, atendiendo a sus palabras, directamente a la cara, y ¿quién puede decir si a partir de la expresión masculina ella adivinó sagazmente que él había reconocido esta precisa coyuntura como escrita en las páginas del destino y si ella lo oyó decir inaudiblemente: «¡Ah, helo aquí: ya sabía yo que acabaría aconteciendo esto!»? En todo caso ella habría sido lo bastante astuta, de haber acaecido dicho milagro, para completar gracias a su propia imaginación los pensamientos de él y no tolerar que éstos ocasionasen ninguna modificación en el tono con que siguió abordándolo—: Oh, yo cojo al toro por los cuernos: ya sé que usted no deseaba conocerme. Si sí lo hubiese deseado habría venido a visitarme: le he dirigido numerosísimas indirectas y tosecillas. Ahora, como ve, ya no pienso toser más: me abalanzo sobre usted y lo aferró. Usted no viene a visitarme: muy bien, yo voy a visitarlo *a usted*. Aparte, no hay ninguna indecencia que yo no esté dispuesta a cometer por mi hija.

La impenetrabilidad del señor Longdon se resquebrajó como el cristal ante el codazo de esta imponente, hermosa, avezada mujer que para él caminaba, cual una fulgurante diosa pagana, envuelta en una nube de misteriosa leyenda. Él desvió la mirada hacia su hija, quien, a suficiente distancia para no escucharlos, no se había inmutado:

—Sé que su hija es una gran amiga de Nanda.

—¿Ha sido Nanda quien le ha dicho eso a usted?

—Muchas veces, y demostrando gran interés por ella.

—En tal caso me alegra que Nanda piense así… aunque lo cierto es que sus intereses son muy variopintos. Pero vaya usted a hacer compañía a mi niña. ¡No hago que sea ella quien se acerque —explicó mientras lo arrastraba— porque quiero que usted se siente ahí junto a ella y guarde ese sitio, como si dijéramos…!

—Ajá, y ¿para quién? —requirió él al callarse ella.

El caminar femenino se había detenido al mismo tiempo que la lengua femenina, y de nuevo, repentinamente, los dos quedaron cara a cara de manera harto consciente y vivida.

—¿Puedo confiar en usted? —espetó la duquesa. Entonces reanudó su plática—: ¡Como si no estuviese haciéndolo ya! Precisamente porque confío en usted tan ciegamente es por lo que no he podido aguantar más sin echarle el guante. La persona a quien quiero que le guarde el sitio es nada menos que el propio Mitchy, y en este momento la mitad de mi desvelo es lograr que le sea guardado competentemente. Lord Petherton es enormemente solícito, pero Lord Petherton no puede ocuparse de todo. Sé que usted aprecia de veras a nuestro anfitrión…

Ante esto, el señor Longdon la interrumpió con cierta sequedad:

—¿Puedo preguntar cómo lo sabe?

¡Pero cuando uno se enfrenta a una diosa fulgurante…! Este personaje no tuvo sino que clavarle la mirada un momento:

—Pues porque, mi querido buen hombre, se halla usted aquí. ¡No se hallaría aquí si lo odiase, dado que prácticamente usted no tolera…!

Esta vez él intervino con la mirada dirigida hacia la muchacha:

—Por el contrario me parece, se lo aseguro, que tolero una gran cantidad de cosas.

—Bueno, no haga alarde de su cinismo —dijo ella riendo— hasta haberse cerciorado de con cuánto puede cargar. Lo mejor será informarlo —siguió— de que esto es lo que la propia Nanda desea.

—¿La propia Nanda? —Él no dejó de contemplar a la pequeña Aggie, quien hasta ahora no había vuelto la cabeza—. Temo no entenderla a usted.

Ella tomó a arrastrarlo mientras le decía:

—Enseguida vuelvo con usted y le explico. *Debo* encontrar mi carta para dejársela a Petherton; tras lo cual traeré aquí a Mitchy, a quien me disponía a buscar, y, puesto que ya he roto el hielo (¡si eso no es mucho decir con semejante oso polar!), le revelaré a usted *le fond de ma pensée*. Niña querida —le dijo a su sobrina—, entretén al señor Longdon. Enséñale —sugirió condescendientemente— lo que lees. —Luego tomó a dirigirse a su compañero de visita como preocupada por aquel preciso aspecto—: *Caro signore*, ¿tendría *usted* algún libro tolerable?

En un abrir y cerrar de ojos la pequeña Aggie se había levantado y ya estaba enseñando su volumen, al cual el señor Longdon, todo cortesía hacia ella, echó un somero vistazo:

—*Relatos de la Historia de Inglaterra*. ¡Oh!

Su exclamación, aunque imprecisa, no lo fue tanto como para impedir que la muchacha aventurase educadamente:

—¿Lo ha leído usted?

El señor Longdon, acogiendo la diminuta sonrisa pura de la muchacha, patentizó sentir que nunca había calado a ésta tan bien como en este concreto momento y asimismo que se trataba de una persona con quien seguramente él se llevaría bien.

—Me parece que sí —respondió él.

La pequeña Aggie se sintió aún más confiada, pero no hasta el punto de personalizar sus propios comentarios:

—No tiene autor. Es anónimo.

La duquesa adoptó, a fin de hacerle una nueva pregunta al señor Longdon, no poco de la seriedad de la muchacha:

—¿Es un libro adecuado?

—No estoy seguro. —Él le dirigió la respuesta a Aggie—: Ha habido algunos episodios horripilantes en la Historia de Inglaterra.

—Caray, horripilantes… ¿los *ha* habido? —dijo entrecortada y dulcemente Aggie, cuyas palabras poseían el más hermoso y suave acento extranjero.

—Pues entonces, querida, el señor Longdon te recomendará alguna bonita obra histórica (porque nos encanta la Historia, ¿verdad?) que excluya los horrores. Lo que nos gusta es conocer —le explicó la duquesa

a la autoridad invocada— las cosas alegres, felices, *adecuadas*. Existen muchísimas, al fin y al cabo, y éste es el lugar para rememorarlas. *A tantót.*

Cuando ella hubo entrado en la mansión a través de la más próxima de las puerta-ventanas que permanecían abiertas, el señor Longdon se ubicó junto a su joven custodiada, a quien trató, durante los siguientes diez minutos, con una exquisita cortesía. Una persona que lo conociera bien habría hallado en toda esta escena, si la hubiese presenciado, ocasión de percatarse nuevamente de que a su discreto modo el señor Longdon era experto en dos diferentes índoles de urbanidad: la índole que aumenta las distancias y la índole que las disminuye. Además, un tal analista habría percibido, en lo tocante a la tía y la sobrina, de cuál de dichas índoles había sido recibiente cada una, e incluso habría podido llegar lo bastante hondo como para percibir en el anciano inequívocos síntomas de la impresión que le había causado su presente compañera, alguna irradiación de su certidumbre de que ésta, desde el punto de vista siguiendo el cual había sido educada, constituía un notable, un insólito triunfo. Puesto que el objetivo había sido producir una especial joven ingenuidad redondeada y coloreada, el fruto había sido cultivado hasta alcanzar la perfección de un melocotón resguardado por un muro tutelar, y esta calidad del objeto resultante de un proceso muy bien había podido hacerlo sentirse ante algo completamente nuevo. La pequeña Aggie difería de cualquier otra persona joven que él hubiera conocido nunca en que había sido deliberadamente preparada para el consumo y en que por ende la docilidad de su alma había colaborado ampliamente en tal proceso de preparación. A su lado, Nanda era una bárbara septentrional, y la razón consistía parcialmente en que los elementos de la naturaleza de esta última señorita ya estaban, públicamente, casi indecorosamente, en activo. Éstos ya se hallaban prácticamente ahí para bien o para mal: la experiencia aún estaba por venir y lo que resultaría de ellos seguía siendo un misterio; pero la suma se realizaría con los números que ya figuraban en la pizarra. En la pizarra de la pequeña Aggie los números aún no estaban escritos; lo cual explicaba suficientemente la diferencia entre las dos superficies. A él ambas muchachas le parecían corderitos a quienes aguardaban los grandes mataderos de la vida; pero mientras que uno, con un lazo rosa en el cuello, no tenía conciencia sino de ser alimentado a mano con el dulce bizcochito de una instrucción irreprochable, el otro lidiaba con intuiciones y presagios, con la sospecha de su destino y el lejano husmillo de la sangre, el cual llegaba hasta los campos floridos.

—Oh, en cuanto a Nanda, es mi cuarta o quinta mejor amiga.

—¡Es un puesto muy bajo! —exclamó riendo el señor Longdon—. ¿No te parece que es más bien un asiento trasero, como suele decirse, dentro del vehículo de la amistad?

—¿Un asiento trasero? —preguntó ella con increíble candor.

—Si no entiendes —dijo su compañero— me está bien empleado, ya que si tu tía me ha dejado contigo no ha sido para que te enseñe la jerga moderna.

—¿La «jerga»? —tomó a desconcertarse inmaculadamente.

—¿Tampoco has oído nunca esa palabrita? Yo consideraría eso un gran dato a favor de nuestra época si no fuera porque mucho me temo que ha sido únicamente la denominación lo que no ha llegado hasta ti.

Fue resueltamente dorada la luz de la ignorancia en la sonrisa de la muchacha:

—¿La denominación? —hizo de eco nuevamente.

Ella entendía tan poco que él renunció:

—Y ¿quiénes son tus otros mejores amigos que van antes que la pobre Nanda?

—Pues están mi tía, y la señorita Merriman, y Gelsomina, y el doctor Beltram.

—Y ¿quién es, si me haces el favor, la señorita Merriman?

—Es mi institutriz, ¿no lo sabía usted?…, pero una institutriz maravillosamente bondadosa.

—Eso, supongo, se debe a que tiene una educanda maravillosamente bondadosa. Y ¿quién es Gelsomina? —inquirió el señor Longdon.

—Es mi antigua nodriza…, mi antigua niñera.

—Entiendo. Bueno, siempre hay que ser considerados con las antiguas niñeras. Pero ¿quién es el doctor Beltram?

—Huy, el amigo más íntimo. Se lo contamos todo.

Para el señor Longdon hubo en esto, junto con un leve misterio, un efecto chocante. Preguntó:

—¿Vuestros pequeños problemas?

—¡Oh, no siempre son tan pequeños! Y él los resuelve todos.

—¿Siempre? ¿En el acto?

—Tarde o temprano —dijo la pequeña Aggie con serenidad—. Y ¿por qué no?

—En efecto: ¿por qué no? —dijo él riendo—. Debe de ser coser y cantar. —No cabía duda: ella era, como había dicho Nanda, un ángel, y teniendo en cuenta esto, era asombroso que fuese propietaria de una

de las más expresivas caritas que él había visto incluso dentro de la expresiva raza de ella. Conformada para expresarlo todo, apenas expresaba todavía siquiera algo de conocimiento. Tenía todos los instrumentos necesarios, pero no había ninguna melodía que éstos supiesen tocar. Por lo demás era un descanso, después de tantas cosas como él había vivido últimamente, estar con una persona para quien todo asunto era tan simple—. Pero, con todo y eso, suena al tipo de doctor a quien, en cuantísimo uno oye hablar de él, desea mandar a buscar.

Ante esto la muchacha tuvo una vislumbre de la confusión:

—Oh, no estoy hablando de un doctor en medicina. Es un clérigo… y mi tía dice que un santo. Creo que ustedes no tienen muchos en Inglaterra —continuó explicando la pequeña Aggie.

—¿Muchos santos? Me temo que no. Tu tía es afortunada si conoce uno. Al doctor Beltram, en Inglaterra, lo llamaríamos reverendo.

—Oh, pero si es que es inglés. Y conoce todo lo que nosotras hacemos… y todo lo que nosotras pensamos.

—¿«Nosotras»? ¿Tu tía, tu institutriz y tu nodriza? ¡Cuán variada gama de conocimientos!

—Oh, la señorita Merriman y Gelsomina sólo le cuentan lo que quieren.

—¿Y tú y la duquesa le contáis lo que *no* queréis?

—Oh, muchas veces… pero siempre lo queremos *a él*, le contemos lo que le contemos. Y sabemos que él siempre nos quiere a nosotras en la misma medida.

—En ese caso naturalmente me doy cuenta —dijo el señor Longdon, ahora con gran seriedad— de lo buen amigo que debe de ser. ¿Así que Nanda —siguió al cabo de un momento— está después de todas estas personas?

Su compañera hubo de reflexionar, pero de improviso recibió auxilio:

—Aquella persona, creo, también está antes. —Lord Petherton, al parecer procedente del jardín, había ido acercándose sin ser advertido por el señor Longdon y de pronto ya estaba casi al alcance de la voz—. Lo veo con gran frecuencia —completó ella—; con más frecuencia que a Nanda. Ah, pero *luego* está Nanda. Y luego —concluyó la pequeña Aggie— el señor Mitchy.

—Ah, me alegra que *él* esté incluido —repuso el señor Longdon— aunque sea en un puesto de la lista un tanto bajo. —Ahora Lord Petherton estaba parado ante ellos, no habiendo en la terraza nadie más con quien hablar, y, con el extraño aspecto de un exceso de fuerza física que casi obstruía el paso, parecía ofrecerles mediante los destellos de sus enormes dientes el beneficio de una especie de brutal cordialidad. En favor de él siempre había que recordar que apenas podía mostrar acatamiento a las exigencias minúsculas de la buena etiqueta sin sorprender a cualquiera; conque cuando cumplía con una que otra minucia, ello no era por fuerza en todos los casos indicio de oscuros propósitos. Cuando el elefante de un espectáculo toca el violín, lo hace preeminentemente esperando ser recompensado con manzanas; lo cual era la razón, sin duda alguna, de que la mitad del tiempo este personaje tuviera pinta de asegurar que, con lo hondamente domesticada que actualmente estaba su naturaleza, no era precisa manzana ninguna. El señor Longdon lo contempló con una vaga aprensión y como si se sintiera incapaz de establecer lo que él mismo habría denominado la culpabilidad social de un tal personaje. Este espécimen de su clase, ¿hacía añicos la tradición o se había limitado a retomarla donde la había encontrado: en un lugar muy distinto de aquel en que el señor Longdon, cuando mucho tiempo atrás cesara de «relacionarse», la había dejado? No hay duda de que nuestro amigo experimentó aversión hacia la posibilidad de una duda interior: si no era el hombre quien deshonraba el título nobiliario, entonces ¿era el título nobiliario quien degradaba al hombre? De alguna forma saltaba a la vista que el honor de Lord Petherton no estaba en una posición enaltecida. Se necesitarían más pruebas para emitir un veredicto definitivo; y sin embargo era precisamente de más pruebas de lo que uno sentía miedo. Lord Petherton se mostró bonachón con la pequeña Aggie, bonachón con el acompañante de ésta, bonachón con todo el mundo, después de que el señor Longdon hubiera explicado que ella estaba teniendo la amabilidad de revelarle la lisia de sus buenos amigos—. Sólo que estoy un poco consternado —dijo el anciano— de ver al señor Mitchett en el último lugar.

—Ah, pero se trata de una lista muy cortita, ¿no es así? Si incluye únicamente a mí y a Mitchy, él no puede estar en un puesto muy bajo. No la dejamos tener *muchísimos* amigos: miramos por nuestro propio interés. —Se dirigió a la muchacha como con un simpático entendimiento jocoso—: ¿Se plantea la cuestión, Aggie, de si debemos dejarte tener al señor Longdon? Más bien parece que eso nos «favorecería» a nosotros…, o sea a Mitchy y a mí. Hombre, duquesa —prosiguió al reaparecer esta dama—, ¿*vamos* a dejarla tener al señor Longdon, y estamos totalmente seguros de lo que estamos buscándonos? Montamos guardia celosamente, ¿sabe usted? —reorientó el chiste hacia la persona a quien había aludido—. Cribamos y aquilatamos, seleccionamos con lupa a los candidatos, y estaría bueno oír a alguien decir que siquiera en

este caso he bajado la guardia. ¡Oh, aquí cerramos filas!

La duquesa, portando en la mano el objeto de su búsqueda, ya había regresado:

—Pues entonces el señor Longdon cerrará filas *con* nosotros: de ahora en adelante considéralo tan de fiar como tú mismo. Aquí está la carta que quería que leyeras; cógela y por favor márchate a dar un paseo, llevándote contigo vigilantemente a mi hija, y luego tráenosla de vuelta. Si no volvéis, sabré que os habéis encontrado con Mitchy y me quedaré tranquila. Vete, corazón —continuó para la muchacha—, pero déjame tu libro para volver a examinarlo. ¡No sé si realmente te conviene! —Los despachó juntos, pero manifestó una severa protesta cuando su amigo extendió la mano para asir el volumen—: No, Petherton: no en cuestión de libros; en el asunto de las lecturas de mi niña no puedo decir que me fíe de ti. Pero para todo lo demás… ¡desde luego! —declaró para el señor Longdon con una mirada de concienzuda bravura mientras se retiraba su otro compañero—. Yo soy partidaria —prosiguió con el mismo talante— de otorgar una cierta dosis de confianza inteligente. Los hombres verdaderamente majos se vuelven más responsables gracias a la sensación de que una ha depositado en ellos su confianza. ¡Pero yo nunca —agregó con desparpajo— fiaría en *él* para todos los asuntos!

XIX

En Mertle muchas cosas le resultaban extrañas al interlocutor de la duquesa, pero acaso ninguna se lo había resultado tanto como la visión de esta medida tomada para la protección de Aggie: una medida tomada para que ésta no dejara de ser lo que debía ser una jovencita de su edad y de su *monde*, como habría dicho su tía. Además lo más extraño de esta impresión estaba en que era posible que realmente aquella diligencia tuviera su lado bueno y que realmente milord entendiera mejor que nadie toda la teoría de su aristocrática amiga sobre peligros y precauciones. La propia muchacha —de eso estuvo bastante seguro el espectador de este incidente— no entendía nada, pero los entendimientos que la rodeaban, llenando todo el aire, lo volvían un compuesto más denso de respirar que ninguno que alguna vez hubiese inhalado el señor Longdon. Para él dicha densidad había ido aumentando en el transcurso del prolongado y dulce día estival, y había algo que la volvía definitivamente opresiva en el hecho de hallarse finalmente acomodado junto a la duquesa. Mas no por ello era éste un encuentro para eludir el cual habría estado dispuesto a servirse de algún pretexto decente. Al punto a que él había llegado, con tantos refinados misterios danzando a su alrededor, había alivio más bien que preocupación en la idea de por fin enterarse de lo peor; y extrañamente le parecía natural no sólo que la duquesa estuviera al corriente de lo peor sino además que se sintiera propensa a comunicarlo en cualquier charla personal. Lo ponía un poco nervioso el hecho de que una persona que tenía tratos con Lord Petherton lo valorara tanto como para anhelar tenerlos también con él mismo: una tal persona debía poseer ora una amplia gama espiritual, ora una exorbitante idea de la gama *de él*. De hecho, cierto es que el propio señor Mitchett debía de tener los más singulares tratos y sin embargo actualmente él se sentía bastante a gusto en compañía del señor Mitchett. Su anfitrión, empero, era un individuo *sui generis*, la incoherencia de apreciar al cual él había aceptado, de una vez por todas, en aras de la necesidad que ocasionalmente sentía de dejar constancia de no ser intransigente. En el fondo quizá apreciaba sumamente a Mitchy porque Mitchy apreciaba sumamente a Nanda; aparte que alrededor del anciano aleteaba la tenue fragancia de la superstición según la cual la hospitalidad no rehusada es una de esas cosas que «obligan». Para el señor Longdon obligaba tanto en lo tocante a los modales como a las opiniones, y en la especial medida en que ahora se sentía obligado lo habría hecho preguntarse, de haber tenido verdaderamente una mala opinión, qué diablos era entonces lo que hacía él en este momento en la residencia de ese hombre. Todo lo cual no impedía que algunas de las insólitas transigencias de Mitchy —si de veras eran transigencias— no lo aliviaran precisamente, por sí mismas, de su vaga inquietud, una inquietud que jamás había sido tan grande como en el instante en que escuchó a la duquesa decirle abruptamente:

—¿Sabe usted lo que pienso sobre Nanda? Tengo un especial deseo de hacérselo saber; ésa es la razón, a decir verdad, de que yo le haya echado a usted el guante así de violentamente. Nanda, mi querido amigo, debería casarse cuanto antes.

Esto era más interesante de lo que él se había esperado, y el efecto producido por su interlocutora, que a ella misma indudablemente no se le escapó, se manifestó en el reprimido sobresalto de él:

—Hasta ahora no había habido ningún motivo para que yo imaginara que tenía usted una opinión sobre este punto; pero yo mismo ya me había formado una, y no sé por qué no habría de declarar con franqueza que coincide asombrosamente con la que acaba usted de expresar. El casamiento de Nanda sería una cosa muy buena.

—¿Una cosa muy buena pero no de mi incumbencia? —La osadía de la duquesa no careció de amigabilidad.

Fue debido a esta circunstancia por lo que tal vez su compañero meditó un instante:

—Probablemente no me convenga decir eso: le proporcionaría a usted una fácil oportunidad de replicarme debidamente. Nada impide afirmar que es una cosa de su incumbencia tanto o más que de la

mía.

—Bueno, ha de ser de la incumbencia de alguien, ¿no? Se supone que es de la de su madre, o de la de su padre; pero en este país los padres se han emancipado aún más que los hijos. Suponga, en verdad, ya que ello parece no ser asunto de nadie, que usted y yo lo *convertimos* en asunto nuestro. No es necesario que ninguno de nosotros dos —continuó— tenga que explicarle sus motivos al otro, aunque yo estoy perfectamente dispuesta, se lo aseguro, a poner mis cartas sobre la mesa. Usted tiene sus sentimientos… todos sabemos que son admirables. Yo, por mi parte, tengo los míos… en favor de los cuales no pienso afirmar sino que son intensos. Pueden pasarse sin ser admirables, puesto que están henchidos de resolución. Por lo demás, puedo mencionar que son más hermosos que feos. Edward y yo estamos unidos por un *cousinage*… ¡aunque para lo que él hace por fomentarlo! Aun cuando él se desentienda de sus hijos y los mande a jugar a la calle, yo les presto la suficiente atención como para abalanzarme de vez en cuando para evitar que los atropellen. Y para Nanda quiero ni más ni menos que al hombre a quien ella misma quiere: no es como si yo quisiera para ella un enano o un jorobado o un *coureur* o un borracho. Vanderbank es un hombre a quien cualquier mujer, ¿no le parece?, se alegraría (a quien más de una mujer *se alegra*) de disfrutar: *beau comme le jour*, rematadamente vanidoso y rematadamente paternalista, pero inteligente y triunfador y no obstante estimado, y sin, por lo que sé, ninguno de los horribles estorbos que en este país tan a menudo empañan el atractivo de aun las personas más agradables. No tiene cinco espantosas hermanas incasadas cuyas visitas deba su esposa soportar constantemente. Aquí la forma en que las hermanas no se casan es la ruina de la alta sociedad, y personas muy fiables me han asegurado (aunque yo personalmente no esté tan enterada) que también es la mina de la conversación y de la literatura. ¿No es precisamente un poco para evitar que la propia Nanda se convierta en esa clase de estorbo (digamos para el propio Harold o bien, un día de éstos, para su hermano y hermana menores) por lo que amigos como usted y yo vemos la importancia de movilizamos antes de que sea tarde? Naturalmente se supone que ella es joven, pero en realidad tiene toda la edad que uno se figure: el mundo londinense las desgasta y las magulla terriblemente.

Ella había ido rápido y llegado lejos, pero al señor Longdon le había dado tiempo de sentirse perfectamente a flote. En todo aquello había tantísimas cosas que comentar, que él puso la mano —cuya flojedad, según no dejó de percatarse él mismo, lo puso en evidencia— sobre la que le quedaba más cerca:

—Quia, salta a la vista que la madre de Nanda (después de veinte años viviendo inmersa en el mundo londinense) sigue bastante lozana.

—¿Lozana? ¿Le parece lozana la señora Brook?

La duquesa tenía un estilo que, en su omnisapiencia, producía más humillación que ánimo; pero él se sintió tanto más decidido por ser consciente de sus propias reticencias:

—Creo que se puede tildar de lozano el parecer tener treinta años.

—Desde luego eso sería perfecto. Pero no es el caso de ella: ella parece tener tres. Sencillamente parece un bebé.

—¡Ah, duquesa, en verdad se muestra usted muy quisquillosa! —repuso él, dándose cuenta de que, así como hasta el más sufrido acaba por rebelarse, a veces la propia angustia puede transformarse en humorismo.

Ella lo encaró a su particular modo:

—Sé lo que digo. Mi sobrina es una persona a quien yo llamo lozana. Está garantizada, como dicen en las tiendas. Por otra parte —siguió—, si una mujer casada ha sufrido, eso no es más que parte de su estado civil. *Elle l'a bien voulu*, y cuando te has casado te has casado; la aflicción es el humo (¡o llamémoslo el hollín!) de la lumbre. De sobra sabe usted —continuó con rotundidad— que la situación de Nanda lo horroriza.

—¡Hombre, tanto como «horrorizarme»! —protestó él restrictivamente.

Aquello llegó a poner ligeramente a prueba la paciencia de su compañera:

—Ahí lo tiene: el típico carácter inglés; ustedes nunca arrostran las consecuencias de sus pareceres. Es pasmoso lo que están dispuestos a hacer con una cosa (cualquier cosa que no pueda cazarse o con la cual no pueda hacerse dinero) antes que examinar sus implicaciones. Si yo deseara salvar a la muchacha como *usted* lo desea, sabría exactamente de qué. Pero ¿por qué diferir por cuestión de motivos —preguntó— cuando opinamos al unísono en cuanto al hecho? No voy a hablar del mayor de los méritos de Vanderbank —agregó—: ser amigo de una persona tan encantadora. ¡Con lo cual, permítame aclarárselo sin pérdida de tiempo —exclamó riéndose—, no me refiero en absoluto a la señora Brook! La señora Brook es encantadora, si así lo quiere usted, pero créame cuando le digo, *caro mio* (si es que le hace falta que se lo digan), que para influir eficazmente sobre él usted vale por veinte como ella.

Lo que resultó más perceptible en el señor Longdon es que, dejando aparte cómo le habían llegado, rara vez anteriormente había recibido, en una sola andanada, tantas cosas sobre las que meditar. De nuevo el único modo de salir airoso fue concentrarse en la que tenía más a mano:

—Cuando usted habla de influir eficazmente, ¿se refiere al problema de hacerlo declararse a Nanda?

Fue aristocrático el asentimiento de la duquesa:

—Usted puede lograr que él se le declare; usted puede lograr, quiero decir, que ello sea inevitable. Usted puede *doter* a la novia. —Después, como por mor de completar, con benevolencia y sin medias tintas, la imperfecta comprensión de su compañero, manifestó—: Usted puede hacer una asignación monetaria en favor de ella que la convierta en todo un *parti*. —Tal vez la comprensión de él fuese imperfecta, pero de todas formas bastó para hacerlo ponerse colorado hasta la raíz del cabello, y tamaño indicio fue aprovechado por la duquesa con no menor celeridad—: El pobre Edward, bien lo sabe usted, no le donará a su hija ni un penique.

Decididamente ella iba rápido, pero en un instante el señor Longdon ya se había puesto a su altura:

—¿El señor Vanderbank (si no la interpreto mal) exigiría por parte de su esposa algo de esa clase?

—Disculpe: ¿quién (en el mundo en que nos movemos todos nosotros) no exigiría lo mismo? El señor Vanderbank, según me han informado, no tiene ahorrado ningún dinero, conque si no cree en matrimonios indigentes no seré yo quien se sienta escandalizada. En cuanto a mí misma, sencillamente desprecio tales matrimonios. Él no cuenta más que con un modesto salario oficial. Aunque es bastante para uno, sería bastante poco para dos… y sería aún menos para media docena. Nuestra dichosa parejita son de ese tipo de personas que aspiran a tener una bonita típica familia inglesa.

Ahora el señor Longdon lo había asimilado todo completamente:

—A lo que en definitiva va a parar la idea que tiene usted la bondad de exponerme, es a sobornarlo para que la despose.

La duquesa siguió mostrándose condescendiente, pero le clavó la mirada:

—Dice usted eso como si se sintiera escandalizado, pero si se lo plantea al señor Van no creo que se escandalice él. Y no me persuadirá usted —continuó incisivamente— de que usted mismo no había pensado ya anteriormente en planteárselo. —Ella mantuvo la mirada en él, y enseguida el efecto de la misma, bien pronto visible en el rostro masculino, fue de una índole capaz de volverla exultante de felicidad—: ¡Hay que ver qué transparente es usted, querido amigo!; sólo hace falta decirle «¡bú!» para hacerlo confesar. Consciente o inconscientemente (más bien lo primero, me inclino a pensar), usted ya lo había seleccionado a él para ella. —Guardó silencio un instante para gozar de su triunfo; tras lo cual continuó—: Y la había seleccionado a ella para él. Estoy caracterizándolo a usted, me dirá (pues ya lo veo venir), como uno de esos horribles metomentodos bienintencionados que son lo peor que hay, pero no tiene sino que pensar un poco (si se me permite llegar así de lejos) para ver que no es precisa ninguna «caracterización» en absoluto. Usted tiene un único vínculo con los Brook, pero se trata de un vínculo dorado. ¿Cómo podemos todos, a estas alturas, no haber calibrado y admirado la belleza de sus sentimientos hacia Lady Julia? Helo ahí: lo hago estremecerse; hablar de ello es profanarlo. Pues entonces, claro que sí, no hablemos de ello, pero actuemos basándonos en ello. —Por fin él había apartado de ella la mirada, y ahora se limitó a contemplar, desde la atalaya de su elevada ubicación, únicamente la belleza del lugar y de la hora, lo cual incluyó una ojeada a Lord Petherton y la pequeña Aggie, quienes, abajo en el jardín, paseaban lentamente en familiar unión. Cada uno tenía su mano en la del otro, balanceándose suavemente mientras ambulaban; no había duda de que su charla versaba sobre flores y frutos y pájaros; eran casi como padre e hija. Y, en resumidas cuentas, desde un kilómetro de distancia se veía que *ellos* no flirteaban. A nuestro amigo lo asaltaba el aturdimiento en insólitas, frías ráfagas: ráfagas arbitrarias y caprichosas; una de ellas, en todo caso, durante esta pausa de su compañera, debió de rugir en sus propios oídos. Por lo tanto, ¿no sería como una continuación de ese estruendo como la oyó volver a hablar?—: Naturalmente estará usted enterado de la tesitura de la pobre muchacha.

Él tardó un buen rato en reaccionar.

—¿Está *usted* enterada? —preguntó manteniendo desviada la mirada.

—Si su pregunta es irónica —dijo ella riéndose—, habría podido ahorrarse perfectamente la ironía. Me avergonzaría de mí misma si, dado mi parentesco y mi interés, no me hubiese ocupado de cerciorarme. Nanda está verdaderamente enferma (tan enferma como un gatito) de pasión. —Fue con una intensidad de silencio como el señor Longdon pareció aceptar esto; durante un rato quedó mudo hasta el punto de que ni siquiera aquella comparación extravagante logró arrancarle una natural exclamación. Una vez más la duquesa, en consecuencia, vio aquí una oportunidad—: A usted sin duda ya se le ha ocurrido que, toda vez que sus propios sentimientos hacia la viva son el maravilloso fruto de sus propios sentimientos hacia la

muerta, habría un sacrificio en memoria de Lady Julia más exquisito que ningún otro.

Ante esto finalmente el señor Longdon se volvió hacia ella y dijo:

—¿La tentativa (siguiendo las directrices apuntadas por usted) en pro de la felicidad de Nanda?

Verdaderamente ella ardió de esperanzas:

—¡Y, merced al mismo criterio, un soberano caso de justicia poética! Sin duda el más precioso, en mi opinión, que jamás se habrá visto.

Así, durante algún rato más, permanecieron sentados cara a cara.

—Por mi parte no veo que haya ninguna dificultad —dijo él al fin—. Sucede que sé, lo confieso, que la propia Nanda desea anhelantemente la ejecución del proyecto de usted.

La sonrisa de la duquesa no delató ninguna sorpresa ante aquel efecto de su propia elocuencia:

—Usted no es hábil escurriendo el bulto. El anhelante deseo de Nanda se opondrá inevitablemente a toda posibilidad de casarse con cualquiera que no sea Vanderbank. Si ella misma desea que yo triunfe a la hora de cazar al señor Mitchett, ¿qué indicio más incontestable de su atolladero íntimo puede pedirse? Pero ya cuenta usted con sobrados indicios, lo noto —se amonestó a sí misma—; podemos obviarlos todos. Desde el principio me he dado perfecta cuenta de que la única dificultad provendrá de la madre de Nanda… pero asimismo de que esa dificultad será ardua.

Tal vez el gesto con que el señor Longdon se quitó los lentes denotara un cierto miedo de ahondar demasiado en lo que veía la duquesa.

—No se me ha escapado que la señora Brookenham apoya al señor Mitchett —comentó él.

Pero aquello no iba a valerle para escabullirse. Ella observó:

—Entonces no ha permanecido usted ciego, colijo, ante los motivos que ella tiene para hacer tal cosa. —Acaso él no hubiese permanecido ciego, mas su visión, ante esto, no demostró gran agudeza, y ello determinó a su interlocutora a enfilar el atajo más corto—: Ella apoya al señor Mitchett porque quiere al «querido Van» para ella sola.

Él no fue inconsciente de haberse quedado mirándola fijamente:

—¿En qué sentido lo quiere para ella sola?

—Ah, el sentido ha de ponerlo usted; yo sólo puedo presentarle el hecho… y es el hecho lo que nos preocupa. *Voyons* —espetó casi irritadamente—; no trate de crear oscuridades innecesarias mostrándose innecesariamente ingenuo. Por lo demás, no estoy dedicándome a viciar su ingenuidad. Dele usted cualquier sentido que milagrosamente sea capaz de satisfacer su indulgente imaginación inglesa: yo no insisto ni remotamente en que tenga que ser un sentido siniestro. Ella lo quiere a él para sí sola… eso es todo cuanto digo. «*Pourquoi faire?*», pregunta usted… o más bien, por ser demasiado tímido, no lo pregunta, pero le gustaría preguntarlo si se atreviera o si no temiera ofenderme. Yo no *puedo* ofenderme, pero, a decir verdad, pese a ello no puedo contestarle. La situación es, pienso, de una índole que no comprendo. Yo comprendo o bien una cosa o bien la contraria: comprendo que se tome posesión de un hombre o que se lo deje en paz. Pero realmente la señora Brook me supera. En todo caso usted debe juzgar por sí mismo. Claro está que Vanderbank podría darle explicaciones si quisiera… pero no estaría bien que quisiera. Conque lo único que nos incumbe es que a la hora de los hechos ella está en contra nuestra. Yo sólo puedo manejar a Mitchy a través de Petherton, pero la señora Brook puede manejarlo directamente. Por otro lado ésa es la manera en que usted, mi querido amigo, puede manejar a Vanderbank.

Como resultado de esta vivida alocución, una cosa se perfiló nítidamente por encima del resto al modo de ver de la pugnaz conciencia del señor Longdon, pero la consternación de éste necesitó un rato para conseguir verbalizarla:

—Puedo asegurarle categóricamente que el señor Vanderbank no abriga ningún sentimiento hacia la señora Brookenham…

—…¿que él no pueda mantener oculto por el simple procedimiento de cerrar la boca y no soltar prenda? Nunca he pretendido que no sea así, y a usted no le tengo reservado nada tan alarmante (*rassurez-vous bien!*) como pedirle que lo invite a sofocar una pasión hacia la madre a fin de desarrollar otra hacia la hija. No se espante de todo este asunto por culpa de un temor prematuro. Nunca he supuesto que sea él quien quiera retenerla *a ella*. Él no está enamorado de ella… ¡esté tranquilo! Pero ella es muy divertida…, muy pero que muy divertida. Le hago perfecta justicia. Tal como aquí son las mujeres, ella es excepcional. Si fuera francesa sería *una femme d'esprit*. Ha inventado una *nuance* muy peculiar y lo ha hecho todo ella sólita, pues Edward figura en su salón sólo como uno de esos sorprendentes extintores de incendios que hay en los pasillos de ciertos hoteles. Él no es más que un cubo colgado de un gancho. A los hombres, a los hombres jóvenes e inteligentes, les parece una casa (y bien sabe Dios que están en lo cierto) donde hay suficiente espacio intelectual para moverse, libertad de conversación. Y es que en su mayoría las tertulias

inglesas son como una cuadrilla bailada dentro de una garita de centinela. Usted me dirá que llegamos más lejos en Italia, y yo no lo negaré, pero en Italia tenemos el sentido común de no tolerar la presencia de muchachitas en la habitación. Los hombres jóvenes rondan a la señora Brook y los hombres inteligentes le ofrecen continuos comentarios descacharrantes que le resultan de lo más sustanciosos. Ella está ante un aprieto inaudito: debe elegir entre sacrificar a su hija y sacrificar lo que ante mí llamó una vez sus aficiones intelectuales. El señor Vanderbank, ya lo ha visto usted mismo, es de entre dichas aficiones una de las más practicadas, una de las más asiduas. Hace tres meses (ello ya no podía ser demorado por más tiempo). Nanda comenzó a «sentarse»: a estar presente, junto a la mesa del té, con una apariencia modosa e ingenuamente abstraída.

—Disculpe, pero yo no creo que Nanda presente *esa* apariencia, duquesa —espetó decidido el señor Longdon. Cuánto había conseguido ella llevarlo lejos a despecho de sí mismo, quedó patente mediante los mismísimos términos de su disentimiento—: No creo que a nadie le parezca «ingenua».

Riéndose, su compañera se encogió de hombros:

—¡Compruébelo por sí mismo y tal vez cambie usted de parecer! —Pero, no obstante, la objeción masculina la hizo recapacitar levemente—: Yo no digo que Nanda sea una hipócrita, pues por su parte desde luego sería menos honesto soltar risitas tontas y hacer guiños. Además la señora Brook tiene la teoría, creo, de que, por lo menos entre las cinco y las siete, ha moderado el tono. ¿Acaso no pretende que nunca puede olvidarse del fastidioso cambio introducido por la presencia de una dieciochoañera dulce y virginal?

—¡No tengo, me temo, ni idea de lo que pretende! —El señor Longdon habló con una sequedad a la cual no hizo sino añadir significación la especial manera que su amiga tuvo de pasarla por alto.

—Los tertulianos se han vuelto —reanudó ella la plática— modosos o fingidores o triviales, pero de lo que no cabe duda es de que se han vuelto, con el bozal que les ha caído encima, tan aburridos como el que más.

Él no dio ningún indicio de recoger estas palabras; en vez de eso dijo abruptamente:

—Pero ¿y si la idea del señor Mitchett no es que Nanda deba casarse con el señor Vanderbank?

Su compañera de visita apenas vaciló:

—Sí será su idea en cuanto quede liberado… y también será la de Lord Petherton *por* él. Por quedar liberado entiendo haber perdido irremisiblemente a Nanda. A la señora Brook entonces le será imposible seguir persuadiéndolo, como hace actualmente, de que manteniéndose a la espera tiene posibilidades. Sus posibilidades habrán cesado de existir, y desea con toda el alma, pobrecillo, casarse. Ahora ya ha visto usted detenidamente a mi sobrina —continuó—. Es otro motivo por el que sostengo que puede usted ayudarme.

—Sí… la he visto.

—Pues bien, ahí la tiene. —Fue como si durante la pausa que siguió a esto permaneciesen sentados mirando a la pequeña y ahora ausente Aggie con una admiración casi pareja—. El buen Dios me la ha confiado —dijo por último la duquesa.

—Entonces se me antoja que es ella misma, con su notable hechizo, quien realmente puede ayudarla a usted.

—Ella me ayudará doblemente si usted me demuestra creer en ella. —Y la duquesa, pareciendo considerar que con esto ya se había explicado con claridad y había vuelto dúctil a su interlocutor, se levantó con confiada majestad—. Lo dejo en manos de usted.

El señor Longdon también se levantó, pero con mayor reflexividad:

—¿Espera de mí que hable con el señor Mitchett?

—¡No se las prometa tan felices de que él no vaya a hablar con *usted*!

El señor Longdon consideró aquello:

—¿En mi calidad, quiere usted decir, de parte interesada?

Alegremente ella batió palmas con sus enguantadas manos:

—¡Es delicioso oír que prácticamente usted reconoce serlo! El señor Mitchett estará dispuesto a aceptar de usted cualquier cosa… sobre todo una perfecta sinceridad. No todos los días se conoce a una persona de la tipología de *usted*, y él es todo un experto en tipologías. Lo dejo en manos de usted, lo dejo en manos de usted.

Ella habló como si se tratara de algo que hubiese depositado físicamente en las manos de él y de lo cual deseara alejarse lo antes posible. Él se cogió de manos por detrás, enderezándose ligeramente, en parte enardecido pero en parte ofuscado:

—¡Ustedes los del grupo son todos personas portentosas!

Ella ejecutó un movimiento de cabeza que evidenció limitado entusiasmo:

—Usted es el mejor de nosotros, *caro mio*… usted y Aggie; pues Aggie es tan buena como usted. También Mitchy es bueno, no obstante; Mitchy es una bellísima persona. Ya ve que no se trata tan sólo del dinero que tiene. Es un caballero. Igual que usted. No hay muchos. Pero hay que actuar sin dilación —añadió con mayor brusquedad.

—¿Qué quiere decir con eso?

—¿Qué quiero decir sino lo que digo? Si Nanda no consigue un marido a toda prisa…

—¿Y bien? —acució el señor Longdon, como quiera que ella pareciese haber quedado detenida bajo el peso de su idea.

—Caramba, pues que entonces no lo conseguirá más tarde…, no lo conseguirá nunca. Me refiero a un marido de la clase que ella está dispuesta a aceptar. Nanda habrá estado en contacto demasiado tiempo para el gusto *de ellos*.

Ella se había trasladado, mirando a lo lejos y a su alrededor —con la pequeña Aggie siempre en sus pensamientos—, hasta el Hamo de escalones, donde otra vez hizo un alto; y de veras había logrado que él siguiera sus pasos interesado en requerirle: —En contacto ¿con qué? —Ella bajó unos pocos escalones mientras él se quedaba inmóvil con el semblante lleno de percepciones tensas y desorganizadas.

—¡Caramba, pues con la *mal'aria* que ellos mismos han creado para ella!

XX

A última hora de la noche en el salón de fumar de Mertle, cuando los fumadores —hablantes y oyentes por igual— se alistaban a dispersarse, el señor Longdon le solicitó a Vanderbank que se quedara allí, y fue entonces cuando el joven, a quien durante toda la velada no le había dirigido ni una palabra, discernió por qué, un tanto anómalamente, el anciano había prolongado su vigilia. «Tengo algo especial que decirle, y he estado aguardando. Espero que no lo moleste. Es bastante importante». En el acto Vanderbank manifestó el más vivo deseo de complacerlo y, encendiendo raudamente otro cigarrillo, tomó a encaramarse en el ancho diván con que estaba amueblada buena parte de la estancia. El salón de fumar de Mertle no era indigno de la formidable elegancia general, y aun el invitado más atrabiliario se habría sentido claramente contento con aquel enorme sofá forrado de piel que, elevado uno o dos escalones por encima del suelo, apoyaba su respaldo contra dos de las cuatro paredes y dominaba, del modo más inmediato, una vista de la mesa de billar. Durante unos instantes el señor Longdon continuó deambulando con el aire de encubierto ensimismamiento que, durante la hora anterior y entre los demás presentes, no le había pasado inadvertido al ojo de su compañero: impulsó una o dos bolas, examinó la forma de un cenicero, balanceó sus lentes casi con violencia y rehusó tanto fumar como sentarse. Vanderbank, acomodado en su elevado asiento y esperando el desarrollo de los acontecimientos, ofrecía un poco el aspecto de un criminal fascinante que, en el tribunal, hubiera intercambiado su sitio con el del juez. Se diferenciaba de otros hombres notablemente apuestos en que el efecto de vestir traje de etiqueta no era, con una obstinación frecuentemente observada en tales casos, el de realzar su porte. Su tipología se veía más bien aminorada que potenciada, y además permanecía allí sentado con una básica circunspección muy a tono con la deferencia que, desde los inicios de su relación con este amigo a la antigua usanza, había aceptado como impuesta. Tenía un gran sentido de los matices del respeto y ahora se preocupaba por no repantigarse más de lo que lo habría hecho ante un superior oficial.

—Si me pregunta —tomó enseguida la palabra el señor Longdon— por qué a estas horas de la noche (tras un día que en el mejor de los casos ha sido demasiado heterogéneo) no me guardo hasta mañana lo que tenga que decirle, sólo puedo responder que apelo a usted ahora porque en mis pensamientos llevo algo tras haber dado rienda suelta a lo cual dormiré mucho mejor.

Delante del estrado había sitio para circular, por el cual hasta ahora el anciano había dado pasos y balanceado los lentes; pero tras decir las anteriores palabras hizo un alto, apoyándose en la mesa de billar, para escuchar la cautivada urbanidad de la contestación suscitada.

—¿Está segurísimo de que, tras haberle dado rienda suelta, *dormirá*? ¿Se trata de una mera confidencia —dijo Vanderbank— que usted va a hacerme el honor de comunicarme? ¿Se trata de algo tremebundo que requiere una respuesta, de suerte que habré de tener en cuenta, por mi parte, el descanso de que yo podría privarlo?

—No tenga en cuenta nada… yo mismo soy alguien que siempre tiene en cuenta demasiadas cosas. No se trata de un asunto en el que lo urgiré para que me dé una respuesta inmediata. Probablemente no pueda darme una respuesta sin haber meditado muchísimo. *Yo* he meditado muchísimo; si no, no estaría hablando ahora. Lo único que deseo es plantearle algo y dejarlo así por el momento.

A usted nunca lo veo —dijo Vanderbank— sin que me plantee algo.

—Eso suena —repuso su amigo— como si yo más bien sobrecargara… ¿cómo suele llamárselo a eso hoy día?… su menú intelectual. Si hay una aglomeración de viandas tírelas todas a la basura sin contemplaciones. Nunca le habré planteado nada semejante a esto.

Había hablado con una gravedad que en aquel gran espacio, donde había una ligera resonancia, causó toda una impresión: una impresión concretada en el momentáneo silencio que se produjo entre ellos. Él mismo fue el primero en interrumpir parcialmente esta pausa echando a andar otra vez, y luego

Vanderbank la interrumpió del todo como incitado por la aprensión de que acaso estuvieran poniéndose demasiado solemnes:

—Vaya, me siento enormemente intrigado y en verdad usted no habría podido escoger una oportunidad mejor. Un secreto (pues claro está que en eso vamos a convertirlo, ¿verdad?) en esta hora embrujada, en esta gran mansión antigua, es todo cuanto mi visita aquí habrá requerido para convertirse en una ocasión memorable. Conque, se lo aseguro, cuantas más cosas me plantee, mejor.

El señor Longdon asió otro cenicero, pero con pinta de hacerlo como consecuencia directa del tono de Vanderbank. Tras haberlo depositado de nuevo, se colocó los lentes; después espetó atalayando a su compañero:

—¿No tiene usted ni idea…?

—…¿de lo que lleva usted en sus pensamientos? Querido señor Longdon, ¿cómo *podría* tenerla?

—Bueno, me pregunto si yo que usted no tendría acaso cierta idea. ¿No hay nada que en las circunstancias presentes le parezca probable que yo desee decir?

Vanderbank lanzó una carcajada que a un oyente habría podido parecerle ligeramente intranquila, y manifestó:

—Cuando habla de «las circunstancias presentes» hace algo que (a menos que sencillamente se refiera a las excitantes condiciones de este preciso momento) naturalmente siempre abre la puerta de lo truculento para un hombre de alguna imaginación. A un tal hombre basta darle un suave codazo para que su espíritu dé un brinco. De cualquier forma, tal es el caso del mío. Mi espíritu casi nunca se tiene en pie: ahora mismo ha quedado tumbado de espaldas. —Se calló unos instantes; su sonrisa era algo forzada—. Lo que quiere plantearme, ¿es algo horrible que yo haya hecho?

—Discúlpeme si insisto. —El señor Longdon habló delicadamente, pero si se acrecentaba la intranquilidad de su amigo, precisamente por ello se reducía la suya propia—. ¿No se le ocurre absolutamente nada?

—¿Se refiere a algo que yo haya hecho?

—No, sino a algo (lo haya hecho usted o no) en lo cual yo haya podido reparar.

No habría podido darse prueba mejor que la expresión de Vanderbank, ante esto, de que el joven había llegado a dominar el arte de seguirles el humor a los demás sin dar la impresión de tratarlos con condescendencia:

—Me parece que debería usted darme alguna pista más.

El señor Longdon se quitó los lentes y dijo:

—Bien: la pista es Nanda Brookenham.

—Ah, entiendo. —Vanderbank respondió con celeridad, pero durante un rato no dijo nada más, y en la quietud tictaqueó más audiblemente el gran reloj marmóreo que le infundía al lugar el aire de un club. El señor Longdon aguardó con una benigna implacabilidad, pero con un visaje en el semblante que hablaba de lo que para él dependía —aunque en lo más hondo de su fuero interno— del resultado de esta paciencia. A este respecto, el silencio entre ellos se convirtió en un consciente rasero externo de la sinceridad del joven. Fue evidente que por fin éste mismo lo consideró así, y un observador de su hermoso y controlado rostro habría advertido una meditación sobre diversos elementos espinosos—: Colijo que me pide usted una declaración —dijo por último— que muy poca gente en cualquier coyuntura tiene derecho a esperar de un hombre. Piense en todas las personas (no pocas muy dignas) a quienes ante más de una pregunta uno no puede menos que responderles, en el mejor de los casos, que no es cosa de su incumbencia.

—Veo que sí que entiende a qué me refiero —dijo el señor Longdon.

—Entonces verá asimismo la eminente excepción que hago con usted. No hay otro hombre con quien yo hablaría sobre eso.

—¡Y el caso es que ni siquiera conmigo habla sobre eso! Pero pese a todo le estoy muy agradecido —añadió el señor Longdon.

—No es debido tan sólo a la seriedad de la cuestión —prosiguió su amigo—; es debido al ridículo que inevitablemente lleva consigo…

La forma en que el señor Longdon indicó el vacío de la estancia fue en sí misma una interrupción:

—¿No me he preocupado lo suficiente por ahorrarle congojas?

—Muchas gracias, muchas gracias —dijo Vanderbank.

—Además, esto no es una nadería.

—¡Por supuesto que no! —repuso el joven, mas con pinta de percibir al siguiente instante cierta incomodidad en su propia aquiescencia—. Pero no me ahorre congojas ahora.

—No pienso hacerlo. —El señor Longdon había vuelto a ponerse de espaldas contra la mesa, en cuyo

reborde apoyó cada una de las manos—. No pienso hacerlo —reiteró.

Su compañero lanzó una carcajada que como mínimo marcó el cese de una tensión:

—Y sin embargo no acabo de ver qué puede usted hacerme.

—Eso es lo mismo que, desde algún tiempo atrás, he estado procurando discurrir.

—Y ¿lo ha descubierto al final?

—Vaya… en este extraordinario lugar por fin ha brillado débilmente la solución.

Vanderbank se quedó francamente asombrado:

—¿Como consecuencia de algo especial que haya sucedido?

El señor Longdon hizo una pausa; luego dijo:

—Para un viejo estúpido que repara en tantas cosas como yo, continuamente está sucediendo algo especial. Si se es un hombre de imaginación…

—¡Ah! —espetó Vanderbank—. ¡Entonces ya veo hasta qué punto lo es usted! Ello no puede menos que hacerme lamentar —siguió— no haber prestado mayor atención a lo que desde ayer ha estado haciendo.

—No he estado haciendo más que lo que entre ustedes los del grupo siempre estoy haciendo. He estado viendo, sintiendo, pensando. Eso no resulta perceptible, de sobra lo sé, para nadie que no sea yo, y es estrictamente asunto mío. Excepto naturalmente —agregó— que se me ha metido en la cabeza presentarle, sobre la base de todo ello, esta singular apelación. Ha habido cosas de las que he cobrado conciencia.

—Ah, entiendo, entiendo. —Vanderbank exhibió la más cordial reticencia. —Así que a partir de sus palabras debo creer, con toda la avidez de mi vanidad, que le parezco la persona más capacitada para comprender dichas cosas.

El señor Longdon pareció preguntarse un instante si ahora su inteligencia no habría recibido un destello casi excesivo; permaneció en la misma posición, con la espalda contra la mesa, y mientras Vanderbank, sobre el sofá, se apoyaba rígido contra la pared, advirtieron en silencio que estaban poniéndose a prueba mutuamente.

—Es usted con mucho el mejor de todos —dijo el anciano—. Tengo mis propias ideas acerca de usted. Posee grandes cualidades.

—Pues entonces somos dignos el uno del otro. ¡Cuando un griego se topa con un griego…! —Y el joven se rió mientras, un poco con gesto de acorazarse, se cruzaba de brazos—: Henos aquí.

Su compañero lo miró un momento más; luego, dándose la vuelta, lentamente echó a caminar alrededor de la mesa. En el más alejado extremo de ésta volvió a detenerse y, tras unos instantes, con gesto nervioso, puso en movimiento una bola o dos.

—Es un asunto hermoso… ¡pero terrible! —musitó por último. No tenía la mirada dirigida hacia Vanderbank, quien durante un minuto no dijo nada; así que de inmediato prosiguió—: Presenciarlo y no desear tratar de ayudar… vaya, soy incapaz de eso. —Vanderbank continuó sin hablar ni moverse, permaneció inmóvil cual si corriera el riesgo de interrumpir algo de gran importancia para sí mismo, y su amigo, desplazándose paralelamente al borde opuesto de la mesa, siguió ocasionando en la quietud, sin la ayuda del taco, el leve entrechocar del marfil—. ¿Desde hace cuánto tiempo (si no le importa que se lo pregunte) ha estado usted sabiéndolo?

Incluso ante esto Vanderbank no ofreció respuesta al principio: ninguna que no fuera levantarse de su asiento, descender al nivel del suelo y, quedándose allí de pie, mirar al señor Longdon desde el lado contrario de la mesa. Ahora se puso serio, pero sin llegar a la solemnidad:

—¿Cómo contestar? Uno nunca puede estar seguro. Un hombre puede imaginar, puede hacer cábalas, pero tratándose de una muchachita, una persona mucho más joven que él y mucho más inerme, un hombre siente… ¿cómo llamarlo?

—¿Cierto escrúpulo? —sugirió el señor Longdon.

—Tal vez se trate de eso; la denominación carece de importancia; en cualquier caso dicho hombre se siente turbado. No quiere ser un asno por una parte pero tampoco alguna otra especie de bruto por la otra.

El señor Longdon había escuchado con atención… con toda una hermosa pinta de estar, en su posición casi definitivamente comprometida, sinceramente dispuesto a recibir información sobre tales puntos procedente de un joven magnífico. Inquirió:

—¿Se refiere a que dicho hombre no quiere volverse presumido… así como no quiere mostrarse cruel?

Visiblemente absorto, Vanderbank esbozó una tenue sonrisa halagadora:

—¡Ah, *usted* entiende!

—¿Yo? Yo debería de entender menos que nadie.

Al decir esto, el señor Longdon se había apartado de la mesa, y los ojos de su compañero, quien tras un momento inteligió plenamente la alusión, lo observaron desplazarse por la habitación y acercarse a una

distinta parte del diván. La consecuencia de esta transición fue que la sola reacción de Vanderbank fuese declarar seguidamente:

—No sé decirle desde hace cuánto tiempo he estado conjeturando, he estado preguntándome. Ella es tan encantadora, tan interesante; y siento como si la hubiera conocido desde siempre. He pensado en hacer una cosa y la contraria… y luego, adrede, he parado totalmente de pensar. Fue lo que me pareció preferible.

—En tal caso infiero —dijo el señor Longdon— que el interés de usted por ella…

—…¿no tiene las mismas características que el interés de ella *por mi*? —Vanderbank había recogido sus palabras atentamente, pero luego de hablar se dedicó a buscar una cerilla y encender un nuevo cigarrillo—. ¡Estoy seguro de que usted se hará cargo —exclamó— del gran esfuerzo que me supone hablar de semejantes cosas!

—Sí, sí. Pero ¿le supone únicamente esfuerzo? ¿No le proporciona ningún placer? Me refiero al hecho de los sentimientos de ella —aclaró el señor Longdon.

De veras Vanderbank precisó meditar un rato.

—Por mucho placer que me proporcionase —respondió—, seguramente yo nunca sería un individuo proclive a caer en sentimentalismos. Soy un soso pasmarote británico.

—¡Pero incluso un pasmarote británico…! —vaciló el señor Longdon—. En resumidas cuentas yo he caído en sentimentalismos *ante usted*.

—¿Acerca de Lady Julia? —preguntó derechamente el joven—. ¿Es así como lo denomina usted?

—Entonces digamos que ambos somos pasmarotes británicos. ¿No se siente enamorado en lo más mínimo?

Entre ellos se produjo, antes de que contestara Vanderbank, otro silencio, que el joven aprovechó para tomar a dar vueltas alrededor de la mesa. Mientras tanto el señor Longdon se encaramó en el elevado asiento y se acomodó como si ahora el juez estuviera donde debía estar. Al final su compañero habló:

—Adonde va usted a parar es por supuesto a que usted ha concebido un anhelo.

—Eso es…, por extraño que parezca. Pero, créame, no ha sido algo precipitado. He estado observándolos a ustedes dos.

—Oh, yo ya sabía que había estado observándola *a ella* —dijo Vanderbank.

—Hasta tal punto que he tomado una decisión. Deseo tantísimo que ella se case… —Pero, tras la pequeña entonación entrecortada de ansiedad con que espetó esto último, el anciano se interrumpió bruscamente.

—¿Y bien? —lo acució Vanderbank.

—Pues que lo deseo tantísimo, que ella, el día en que se case, percibirá los intereses de una considerable suma de dinero (muy decentemente invertida desde hace ya tiempo) que he resuelto conferirle.

La instantánea admiración de Vanderbank inundó toda la estancia:

—¡Eso es extraordinario por parte de usted…, es magnífico!

—Huy, tiene usted a su alcance un modo fáctico de demostrarme su gratitud ante ello.

Pero, debido al entusiasmo, Vanderbank apenas lo oyó:

—Me es imposible expresarle lo admirable que me parece usted. —Entonces requirió con vehemencia—: ¿Nanda está informada?

Tras cierta vacilación, el señor Longdon habló con relativa sequedad:

—Mi idea es que de momento sólo usted lo esté.

También Vanderbank vaciló:

—¿Ningún otro hombre?

Su compañero se puso aún más serio:

—Apenas necesito decir que confío en que usted guardará secreto.

—Absolutamente y a ultranza, en tal caso. Pero eso no obstará para que yo mantenga mi opinión sobre el hecho. Durante muchísimo tiempo nada me había dado tan gran alegría. —Resplandeciente y abierto, por unos instantes le había sostenido la mirada al señor Longdon.

—Caramba, entonces resulta que aprecia a Nanda de veras.

—Enormemente. Nunca, creo, tantísimo como ahora. Eso suena bastante grosero, ¿verdad? —dijo riendo —. Pero lo cierto es que lo que usted acaba de anunciar es de esas cosas que llenan de júbilo.

Durante un instante su amigo casi se puso rojo de contento:

—La suma que voy a conferir será, puedo mencionarlo, sustanciosa, y desde luego estaría listo para dejar un claro testimonio (una garantía muy nítida) de mis intenciones.

—¡Tanto mejor! Sólo que —cambió inopinadamente de tercio Vanderbank— para recibirla, ¿ella *debe* casarse?

—Iría contra mis intereses dejarlo suponer que ella no deba hacerlo, y si le he hablado a usted se debe exclusivamente a mi intenso deseo de que ella se case.

—¿Y asimismo a la razón adicional —cooperó osadamente Vanderbank— de que da usted por sentado que sólo falta que yo me ofrezca voluntario?

Si su amigo semejó considerarlo, resultó ser a fin de buscar la expresión más plena. De hecho nada habría podido ser más denso que la serena manera como enseguida dijo:

—Mi querido muchacho, yo voto por usted.

A Vanderbank paladinamente aquello le llegó al corazón:

—¡Cuán extraordinariamente halagador es usted conmigo! —El silencio del señor Longdon pareció responder que estaba dispuesto a permitir interpretarlo así, conque a renglón seguido el joven continuó—: A lo que entonces todo va a parar (tal como usted lo plantea) es a que se trata de una forma de que yo incremente apreciablemente mis ingresos.

Durante un rato el señor Longdon permaneció sentado con la mirada clavada en la superficie verde de la mesa de billar, vivida bajo la expansiva luz de la lámpara colgante.

—Creo que debería revelarle a usted la cifra que tengo pensada —dijo.

Cualquier otra persona presente se habría sentido abrumada de dudas tanto a la hora de determinar el grado de fastidio concentrado en la gentil sonrisa de Vanderbank como a la de decir si transcurrió un prolongado intervalo antes de que éste se hiciera oír:

—Pues yo creo, ¿sabe?, que no debería usted hacer nada semejante. Olvídese de ello, por favor. Lo importante son los intereses… lo importante son las aspiraciones que usted manifiesta. ¡Representan tal visión de mí, tal actitud hacia mí…! —Callóse, bajando los brazos y apartándose ante aquella nítida imagen.

—En todo ello no hay nada que deba anonadarlo. Sería extraño que usted mismo no tuviera, respecto de su valía y su futuro, un sentimiento tan vivo como cualquiera que tenga yo. Ahí *está* el mío en cualquier caso. No puedo remediarlo. Acéptelo. Y del otro sentimiento (de cómo me conmueve *ella*) no hablaré.

—¡Ya lo transparenta usted sobradamente!

El señor Longdon prosiguió contemplando el círculo luminoso sobre la mesa, abismado unos instantes en el cual dejó pasar la réplica de su amigo:

—Ante usted no voy a extenderme sobre Nanda.

—Mejor —dijo Vanderbank. Mas, durante la pausa que siguió, cada uno, de una manera o de otra, muy bien pudo dedicarse a pensar en la muchacha para sus adentros.

La pausa fue interrumpida por la circunstancia de que al poco el señor Longdon reanudara su plática:

—Claro está que superficialmente todo esto da la impresión de que me ofrezco a pagarlo a usted por dar cierto paso. Tiene usted la alternativa de mostrarse grandioso y orgulloso… de envolverse en su propia majestad y preguntar si es que lo supongo sobomable. No he hablado sin haber previsto esa posibilidad.

—Ya —dijo Vanderbank comprensivamente—; pero no es como si usted estuviera proponiéndome, ¿verdad?, algo espantoso. Si uno aprecia a una muchacha, se alegra infinitamente de que tenga algún dinerillo. Cuantas más cosas buenas tenga, mejor. Puedo asegurarle —agregó con la brillantez de su cordial comprensión y casi como para mostrarle a su compañero el camino para despreocuparse más velozmente—, puedo asegurarle que si me decido a aceptar su propuesta haré oídos sordos a cualquier interpretación maliciosa de mis móviles. Sencillamente intentaré mostrarme tan magnífico como usted mismo. —Fumó, se puso a dar pasos; luego abordó otro aspecto—: Seguramente usted sabe que el querido y viejo Mitchy, bajo cuyo bendito techo estamos tramando esta traición nocturna, se casaría con ella en un santiamén y sin necesidad de un solo penique.

—Creo que lo sé todo, creo que he pensado en todo. El señor Mitchett —añadió el señor Longdon— es imposible.

Por un momento Vanderbank pareció sorprendido:

—¿Debido enteramente a la postura de *ella*?

—Por completo.

Otra vez Vanderbank titubeó:

—¿La ha interrogado?

—La he interrogado.

Una vez más Vanderbank vaciló:

—Y ¿así es como está enterado?

—¿De las posibilidades *de usted*? Así es como estoy enterado.

Paladeando su cigarrillo con concentración, el joven tomó a dar algunos pasos en derredor.

—Y la idea de usted, ¿*es* concederme un plazo máximo? —inquirió.

El señor Longdon hubo de darle vueltas a su idea unos momentos:

—¿Qué plazo necesita usted?

Con la cabeza Vanderbank ejecutó un gesto negativo que fue a la vez reprobatorio e indulgente:

—Debo asimilar todo esto un poco. Sólo he podido meditar sobre su ofrecimiento estos fugaces minutos, y es demasiado pronto para comprometerme a afirmar nada. Excepto —añadió galantemente— mi gratitud.

Ante esto, el señor Longdon, que estaba sentado en el diván, se incorporó, tal como Vanderbank ya hiciera previamente, impulsado por un resorte emocional; sólo que, a diferencia de Vanderbank, se quedó inmóvil allí de pie, con las manos en los bolsillos y el semblante, un poco más pálido, orientado hacia lontananza. En él se advirtió decepción incluso antes de que hablara:

—¿No experimenta usted un sentimiento lo bastante poderoso…?

Su amigo lo encaró con admirable franqueza:

—¿No le parece que, si lo experimentase, hace mucho que yo ya habría dado el paso decisivo?

—¿Sin aguardar, quiere decir, al dinero de nadie? —Durante unos instantes el señor Longdon acarició una posibilidad—: Claro está que ella había parecido (hasta ahora) demasiado pequeña.

Nuevamente Vanderbank se puso a buscar cerillas y ocupó un lapso en encender otro pitillo; luego dijo:

—Hasta ahora… sí. Pero no es sólo —prosiguió— porque ella es tan joven por lo que (para nosotros dos, y asimismo para el querido y viejo Mitchy) ella resulta tan absorbente. —Ahora el señor Longdon había descendido hasta el nivel del suelo, y los ojos de Vanderbank lo siguieron hasta que volvió a detenerse—. Discierno que, pese a lo que dijo al inicio de esta conversación, usted siente cierto apremio.

—¿En la cuestión del tiempo? Oh sí, quiero que el casamiento se efectúe *ya*. Es la razón —aclaró el anciano lisa y llanamente— de que me apriete las tuercas a mí mismo. —Hablaba con un retintín de impaciencia—. A Nanda quiero sacarla fuera.

—¿«Fuera»?

—Fuera de la casa de su madre.

Vanderbank se rió, aunque, a renglón seguido, ya se había puesto colorado:

—¡Caramba, en la casa de su madre es precisamente donde suelo verla!

—Exactamente; y ojalá no lo fuese y así todo iría más rápido.

Vanderbank, con todo y su gentileza, asumió un semblante aún más divertido:

—Pero si no lo fuese, como dice usted, me parece que usted no se vería asaltado por ese peculiar sentimiento de urgencia.

Ajustándose los lentes, el señor Longdon lo atalayó con una mirada tan triste como aguda; a continuación se quitó de un tirón los quevedos:

—Ah, observo que me entiende usted.

—¡Huy —dijo Vanderbank—, es que soy un amasijo de corrupción!

—Muy bien puede serlo, pero no va a escabullirse —repuso con brío el señor Longdon— utilizando ningún pretexto semejante. Si usted es lo bastante bueno para mí, es lo bastante bueno, como lo sabe perfectamente, desde todos los puntos de vista, para cualquiera.

—Muchas gracias. —Pero Vanderbank, con todo y su alegre agradecimiento, tomó a meditar—: Deberíamos, de todas formas, recordar, ¿verdad?, que habremos de enfrentamos a la oposición de la señora Brook.

Su compañero no vaciló sino por un instante:

—Ah, ésa es otra cosa que yo ya sabía. Pero asimismo es precisamente la razón. La razón de que yo quiera sacar fuera a Nanda.

—Entiendo, entiendo.

La respuesta había sido rauda, y sin embargo súbitamente el señor Longdon pareció dar a entender que la sospechaba superficial:

—A menos que sea de la señora Brook de quien está usted enamorado. —Entonces, viendo que su amigo recibía esta insinuación con un simple ademán negativo, repudiación ésta que incluso habría podido sorprender por su mismísima ausencia de sorpresa, enmendó—: O a menos que la señora Brook esté enamorada de usted.

Ante esto Vanderbank exhibió todo el decente jolgorio imaginable:

—¡Ah, por supuesto ése puede ser perfectamente el caso!

—Pero ¿lo *es*? He ahí el problema.

Él conservó su ligereza:

—Si ella me hubiese declarado su pasión, ¿no sería más bien hacerle a ella una jugarreta…?

—…¿el hecho de hacérmelo saber? —El señor Longdon reflexionó—. Puedo decir que lo ignoro: es un tipo de cosa para la cual carezco de un rasero o un precedente. En mi tiempo la mujer no declaraba su pasión. Yo me refería a cuál es el significado de eso de que la señora Brookenham lo quiere a usted (como he oído decir) para ella sola.

Vanderbank, conservando la sonrisa, fumó unos instantes; y dijo:

—¿Eso ha oído decir?

—Sí, pero debe perdonarme que no le revele a quién se lo he oído decir.

Se sintió divertido por la discreción de su amigo:

—Es algo inconcebible. Pero da igual. Los del grupo decimos de todo… acerca de todos. Para entendemos, el significado de eso es… vaya, un matiz moderno.

—En tal caso lidie usted mismo —dijo el señor Longdon— con sus matices modernos. —Ahora habló como si el caso requiriera únicamente dicha lidia.

Pero ante esto su joven amigo se puso más serio:

—¿*Usted* no podría hacer nada?… para lograr, quiero decir, que la señora Brook se aviniese.

El señor Longdon se apasionó bruscamente:

—¿Pedirle, en nombre de usted, la mano de su hija? Mañana mismo… si usted me autoriza. Autoríceme y actuaré sin dilación.

A Vanderbank volvieron a subírsele los colores; su rubor fue absoluto:

—¡Hay que ver cómo lo desea *usted*!

El señor Longdon, tras lanzarle una mirada, se volvió de espaldas:

—¡Hay que ver cómo no lo desea usted!

El joven persistió en su sonrojo:

—No: debe usted hacerme justicia. No se ha equivocado conmigo: yo percibo en su propuesta todo cuanto, me parece, puede desear que perciba. Sólo que *usted* la ve demasiado sencilla… y sin embargo no puedo darle explicaciones en este momento. Si *fuese* tan sencilla yo le diría al instante: «Háblele en mi nombre». Con mucho gusto dejaría el asunto en sus manos. Pero yo necesito tiempo, permítame recordárselo, y usted aún no me ha respondido qué plazo me concede.

Esta apelación había vuelto a ponerlos cara a cara, y la primera reacción del señor Longdon ante la misma fue consultar su reloj:

—Es la una en punto.

—¡Oh, yo necesito —Vanderbank había recobrado su buen humor— algo más que esta noche!

El señor Longdon se dirigió hacia una mesita sobre la que aún se veían dos palmatorias:

—Naturalmente debe tomarse todo el tiempo que necesite. No lo agobiaré, no lo apremiaré. Me voy a la cama.

Adelantándosele, Vanderbank le encendió su palmatoria; tras lo cual, pasándosela y sonriendo, preguntó:

—¿Habremos contribuido al descanso de usted?

El señor Longdon contempló la otra palmatoria:

—¿Usted no se va a la cama?

—A *mi* descanso sí que no habremos contribuido. Voy a quedarme levantado un rato más.

—Bien. —El señor Longdon se sintió complacido—. Espero que no olvidará, como prometimos, dejar apagadas las luces.

—Si usted me considera fiel en lo mucho, bien puede considerarme fiel en lo poco. Buenas noches. —Vanderbank le ofreció la mano.

—Buenas noches. —Pero el señor Longdon lo retuvo un momento—: ¿*No* le apetece saber mi cifra?

—No por ahora… no por ahora. *Por favor*. —Realmente Vanderbank parecía temerla, pero tras de que el señor Longdon lo desasiera con una leve exclamación decepcionada, se dirigieron juntos hacia la puerta del salón, al llegar a la cual volvieron a detenerse.

—Ella va a venir a visitarme al pueblo (a solas) en septiembre.

Vanderbank titubeó:

—Así, pues, ¿puedo ir de visita yo?

Su amigo, sobre esta base, hubo de reflexionar:

—¿Para entonces ya habrá tomado usted su decisión?

—Temo no poder prometerlo… si usted piensa considerar mi visita como una respuesta definitiva.

El señor Longdon siguió meditando; luego, alzando la vista, declaró:

—No veo muy bien por qué no quiere usted permitirme revelarle…

—…¿los pormenores de sus intenciones? Pues yo *sí* lo veo muy bien. Ya ha dicho más que bastante. Si mi visita me comprometería definitivamente —siguió Vanderbank—, entonces me temo que no me es posible ir.

El señor Longdon, que ya había salido al pasillo, profirió una seca risita triste:

—¡Venga entonces (como dicen las mujeres) «sin compromiso»!

Tras lo cual, cerrando la puerta bastante suavemente, Vanderbank quedó solo en la gran sala de billar iluminada y desierta.

Libro Sexto

LA SEÑORA BROOK

XXI

Presentándose en Buckingham Crescent tres días después del domingo transcurrido en Mertle, Vanderbank se encontró a Lady Fanny Cashmore en pleno acto de despedirse de la señora Brook y se encontró a la propia señora Brook en el estado de sorda exaltación que constituía el marchamo de toda su relación —y acaso especialmente de sus despedidas— con Lady Fanny. Esta espléndida criatura divulgaba y exteriorizaba, por así decirlo, tan poco que Vanderbank quedó nuevamente impresionado ante todo lo que la señora Brook lograba percibir y asimilar, si bien nada, a ese respecto, en Buckingham Crescent, había quedado más plenamente establecido que el imperturbable grandor de la casi total ausencia, por parte de la renombrada beldad, de expresión verbal. Todos y cada uno de los aspectos de este fenómeno habían sido generosamente discutidos allí y se había derrochado infinito ingenio examinando detenidamente cómo era posible que gracias a un mero rostro espléndido se evitase que a la gente la aburriera mortalmente semejante dosis de lo que en cualquier otro caso el mundo habría calificado como absoluta estupidez. La señora Brook era quien, en este asunto como en tantos otros, había logrado la suprema formulación del mecanismo, había dictaminado, bastante acertadamente, ante cualquier persona interesada: «Mi querido amigo, todo retrotrae, como de costumbre, a un sencillo problema de arrojo personal. Se trata únicamente, no importa cuándo o dónde, de tenerlo en cantidad suficiente. Lady Fanny tiene la valentía de todo su silencio… hasta tal punto que la hace salir airosa del trance y es lo que en realidad la vuelve fascinante. No tener miedo de lo que pueda ocurrirte cuando no tienes más cosas que decir personalmente que un barco de vapor sin faros… en verdad ése es el más elevado heroísmo, y la grandeza de Lady Fanny es que jamás tiene miedo. Arrostra el riesgo cada vez que hace vida social: arriesga, como si dijéramos, tranquilamente su vida. Simplemente te mira tras esa gloriosa máscara y a efectos prácticos te dice: “No pienso abrir los labios, no (lo que se dice abrirlos), durante los cuarenta minutos que voy a permanecer aquí; pero serenamente te desafío, así y todo, a que me asesines por ello”. Y nosotros no la asesinamos: nos entusiasmamos con ella… si bien cuando cualquiera de nosotros la ve en un círculo de otras personas es como ver a un ciego corpulento en mitad de la calzada de Oxford Street. Dan auténticas ganas de avisar a la policía». Vanderbank, antes de que su compañera de visita se la llevara puesta, tuvo el beneficio de poder contemplar la gloriosa máscara y a duras penas habría podido no sentirse divertido ante el modo como era únicamente la señora Brook la que exhibía indicios de agotamiento mental. En el platillo opuesto de la balanza, Lady Fanny se mostraba radiante y olímpica, de tal guisa que aunque saltaba a la vista que entre las dos mujeres habían pasado muchas cosas, todas ellas le habían pasado exclusivamente a la anfitriona. En resumidas cuentas la presencia que impregnaba el ambiente era sólo la de Lady Fanny, que tocó a su fin cual un banquete o una procesión. La señora Brook abandonó la habitación con ella y, al regresar, estaba henchida de dicha presencia:

—¡Ella va a irse, va a irse!

—¿Adónde va a irse? —Para esta cuestión Vanderbank pareció tener menos atención que de ordinario.

—Pues adondequiera que su amante le proponga; probablemente (igual que Ana Karenina) a alguna pequeña localidad italiana.

—¿Ana Karenina? Ella no se parece ni remotamente a Ana.

—Desde luego no es tan inteligente —dijo la señora Brook—. Pero eso la estropearía. Así es que todo va bien.

—Me alegro de que todo vaya bien —dijo riendo Vanderbank—. Pero seguramente la tendremos con nosotros todavía una temporadita.

—La tendremos con nosotros, confío, suceda lo que suceda. Ella reaparecerá: seguirá siendo, lo presiento, una de esas cosas formidables con que de alguna forma el destino parece haberme obsequiado como ocupación para los ratos perdidos. No sé —agregó la señora Brook— qué la mantiene aún en el borde,

el cual no tiene ni un centímetro de ancho.

Esta vez pareció que Vanderbank procuraba cavilar:

—¿No serás *tú* quien lo hace?

La señora Brook meditó más hondamente:

—A veces lo creo así. Pero no estoy segura.

—Claro, ¿cómo puedes estar segura si ella es incapaz de decírtelo?

—¡Huy, si yo dependiera de que ella tuviera que decirme algo…! —Dicho esto, la señora Brook sacudió uno o dos cojines del sofá y se dejó caer en el extremo que había arreglado. Era calurosa la tarde de agosto y agobiante el aire londinense; además la habitación, aunque agradablemente umbría, exhalaba la ranciedad típica de final de temporada—. Si no hubieras acudido hoy —siguió—, ya no habrías podido verme hasta no sé cuándo, pues hemos vuelto a alquilar la Casucha (a cambio de una miseria, pero aun así la hemos alquilado) y el viernes me voy de la capital para comprobar que no esté demasiado cochambrosa. Edward, que está furioso a causa de lo que he cobrado por ella, tenía el plan de que este año pasáramos allí estas fechas nosotros mismos.

—Y ahora —recogió sus palabras Vanderbank— esa acariciada ilusión se ha convertido simplemente en el fantasma de una intención muerta, un fantasma que, en compañía de un millar de predecesores, ronda esta casa en el crepúsculo y os asalta desde los rincones más siniestros.

—Oh, en realidad las intenciones muertas de Edward constituyen una compañía muy animada y digna del perpetuo luto espiritual en que parecemos pasamos la vida entera. Son peores que los parientes que constantemente perdemos sin que por ello semeje decrecer su número, y todos los días espero enterarme de que el *Morning Post* lamenta tener que anunciar también en este sentido algún nuevo óbito. Las apariciones que tienen lugar tras las muertes de tantísimas intenciones *son* particularmente terroríficas en el crepúsculo, de tal forma que en esta época del año, en que las horas se hacen interminables, me alegro de tener conmigo a cualquiera que pueda mantenerlas a raya.

Vanderbank no había tomado asiento; lenta y familiarmente se paseaba por la estancia:

—Y ¿dónde está Nanda?

—Oh, *ella* no supone ningún alivio: más bien convoca a los espectros más horripilantes. Edward y Nanda y Harold y yo sentados juntos somos todo un caso para esa… ¿cómo demonios se llama?… Sociedad investigadora[16]. Privados del dulce recreo de la Casucha —continuó la señora Brook—, a partir del 10 tendremos que arreglárnoslas solos para damos forraje unos a otros. Tal vez Mitchy —agregó— insistirá en invitamos a ir a Bayreuth.

—¿Será ésa la forma, quieres decir, que adoptará su propio forraje?

La señora Brook apenas vaciló:

—A no ser que prefieras tomártela como la forma que adoptará el tuyo.

Por unos momentos Vanderbank semejó examinar aquella propuesta bastante cortésmente, mas con la consecuencia de advertir un obstáculo:

—Oh, me temo que deberé dar vueltas a la noria durante todo el mes y que para cuando me den las vacaciones ya habrá dejado de sonar definitivamente cualquier Anillo en Bayreuth[17]. ¿Tu plan es llevar allí a Nanda? —preguntó.

Ella alargó el brazo para hacerse con otro cojín y dijo:

—Si te es imposible sumarte a este proyecto, ¿por qué habría de interesarte ese punto?

—Mi querida amiga —y el visitante se dejó caer en un asiento—, ¿supones que mi interés depende de futesas tales como aquello a lo cual *yo* pueda sumarme? De sobra sabes —siguió en un tono distinto— por qué me preocupo por Nanda e inquiero sobre ella.

Ella fue absolutamente rauda:

—De sobra lo sé, igual que sé que se trata de un motivo ilegítimo. ¡No te sientas tan seguro!

Por unos instantes permanecieron mirándose mutuamente.

—¿Quieres decir que no me sienta tan seguro no sea que la presunción termine subiéndoseme a la cabeza? ¿Realmente estás previniéndome contra la fatuidad?

—Tus «realmentes», mi querido Van, son un poco intimidatorios, pero me da la impresión de que, antes de contestarte, hay una pregunta que tengo derecho a hacerte. ¿«Realmente» albergas lo que se llama intenciones respecto de mi hija?

—Tu pregunta —repuso Vanderbank— muestra con exactitud el nivel de tu sapiencia sobre esta materia. Además no entiendo muy bien por qué hablas como si yo estuviera prestándole una atención repentina o anómala. ¿Qué he hecho durante los últimos tres meses sino estar hablándote sobre tu hija? ¿Qué has hecho tú sino estar hablándome *a mí* sobre ella? Desde el momento en que por primera vez hablaste conmigo

(«enrabietadamente», según recuerdo que lo calificaste) sobre el cambio introducido en tu vida social por su finalmente efectiva, su perpetua, su inexorable participación… desde ese momento, ¿qué hemos estado haciendo ambos sino reflexionar juntos sobre el problema de adecentar el salón, como lo expresaste tú (¿o como lo expresé yo?), para un joven espíritu femenino?

La señora Brook encaró bastante serenamente la frontalidad de aquella demanda:

—Vaya, ¿adónde quieres ir a parar? Naturalmente que he hablado de esa diferencia en mi vida: resulta que estoy hecha de tal forma que mi vida tiene algo que ver con mi intelecto y mi intelecto algo que ver con mi charla. Una charla sustanciosa: ya sabes (nadie, querido Van, debería saberlo mejor) qué papel representa eso para mí. ¡Por consiguiente, cuando una tiene que volver deliberadamente insustancial su charla…!

—¿«Insustancial»? —Vanderbank, en su diversión, se recostó en su asiento—. ¡Querida señora Brook, qué graciosa eres!

—Sabes muy bien a qué me refiero: una charla boba, plana, de cuarta categoría. Cuando una tiene que autocensurarse hasta esos extremos (y por una razón absolutamente extrínseca), no tiene nada de extraño que a veces una le confíe a alguien su irritación.

—Oh —protestó Vanderbank—, no te haces justicia. Para ti la irritación no ha sido la única consecuencia de este asunto.

La señora Brook meditó sombríamente:

—No, claro; he tenido mis instantes de calma: la calma de una perfecta desesperación. Me ha parecido ver irse todo a la porra.

—Huy, ¿cómo puedes decir eso —requirió su visitante— si en lo que hemos convenido más a menudo es precisamente en la imposibilidad práctica de introducir ningún cambio? ¿Acaso no ha dado la impresión de que realmente los del grupo somos incapaces de trastrocar hábitos conversacionales tan profundamente arraigados?

Otra vez la señora Brook reflexionó:

—Como si nuestra forma de entender la vida fuera demasiado seria para rebajarla a perogrulladas. No lo sé; creo que tú eres el único que no ha advertido nuestros sacrificios, nuestras componendas y concesiones. Yo misma me he sentido constantemente ahogada en ellas. Pero así están las cosas —prosiguió disgustada —. Lo que no admito es que me hayas convencido para que tome como prueba de tus «propósitos» (por utilizar el odioso vocablo) tu complicidad conmigo en aras de esa disparatada figuración, que es lo que a fin de cuentas es, de la preservada pureza de pensamientos de Nanda.

La cabeza de Vanderbank, en su asiento, estaba echada hacia atrás; su mirada vagaba por el techo de la habitación:

—Nunca he guardado ningún secreto acerca de que yo la considero (a su modo, desde luego) la muchacha más encantadora de Londres. Eso es lo que ella *es*.

Su compañera guardó silencio un momento; luego dijo:

—Lo es, vaya que sí. Pues bien —agregó entonces—, ya que he vivido lo suficiente para oír a alguien considerarla así, no estará fuera de lugar hacerte saber la diferencia que en mi apreciación de ello se ha operado gracias a nuestra deliciosa breve estancia en Mertle. De alguna forma se han elevado —declaró la señora Brook— las esperanzas que tengo puestas en Nanda.

Vanderbank fue raudo en mostrar que sabía lo que quería decir aquello:

—¿De modo que a la hora de otorgar su mano ni siquiera Mitchy te parecería lo bastante elevado ahora?

Pero su amiga hizo caso omiso de la pregunta:

—La manera como el señor Longdon la hace objeto de sus preferencias es el tipo de cosa que le da a una muchacha, como dice Harold, un «espaldarazo». Es rematadamente curioso y me ha dado que pensar: el señor Longdon no es absolutamente nada, según los actuales parámetros de Londres, en sí mismo… así que, dime, ¿cómo es que consigue, cuando lo «añadimos» a ella, que se duplique la cotización de Nanda? De uno u otro modo se me antoja que, gracias a que es sabido que él la respalda y gracias a la bonita historia de la devoción de él hacia mamá y todo lo demás (¡oh, si servidora decidiera *explotar* eso!), ahora ella nene muchísimas más posibilidades.

Los ojos de Vanderbank seguían clavados en el techo:

—*Es* curioso, ¿a que sí?… aunque creo que él es bastante más «en sí mismo», incluso según los actuales parámetros de Londres, de lo que ni remotamente sospechas. —Él pareció concederle tiempo para justipreciar esta aserción, pero como ella no dijera nada, continuó—: Seguro que si ahora incluso yo *hiciera* una propuesta matrimonial te parecería demasiado tarde.

Fue sólo indirecta la atención que ella le prestó a aquello:

—Es rematadamente vulgar hablar sobre ello, pero no puedo evitar pensar que el señor Longdon terminará tomando alguna decisión posiblemente muy generosa.

—Oh, ya hablamos de eso tiempo atrás —dijo Vanderbank— y ya sabes que también pensaste que esa generosidad podría abarcarme incluso a mí.

Sin embargo ella continuó, como si apenas lo hubiese oído, perfilando su propia visión:

—Bien es verdad que hasta el momento…

—¿Y bien? —la acució él al quedarse callada.

Siguió callada un instante; por fin habló:

—Digo las cosas más soeces. Pero las *hemos* dicho peores, ¿verdad? Hasta el momento, quiero decir, él no le ha dado nada a Nanda. A menos que de hecho —meditó— ella haya recibido algo y no me lo haya contado.

Vanderbank fue mucho más al grano:

—¿A qué te refieres? ¿A dinero?

—Sí. ¿No es horrible?

—¿Que te refieras a eso?

—Que yo hable así. —Al parecer su amigo no estaba listo para asentir, y con bastante celeridad ella prosiguió—: Si él le *hubiera* dado algo, ello se notaría de alguna forma en los desembolsos de ella. Ella goza de una gran libertad y es muy secretista, pero aun así se notaría.

—Él no le daría nada sin hacértelo saber. Tampoco ella, sin hacértelo saber —agregó Vanderbank—, lo aceptaría.

—Oh —dijo la señora Brook tranquilamente—, ella me odia lo bastante para ser capaz de cualquier cosa.

—Eso no es más que tu romántica teoría.

Una vez más ella pareció no oírlo; imprevistamente abordó otro aspecto:

—¿Él te ha dado algo *a ti*?

Su visitante sonrió:

—Ni tan siquiera un cigarrillo. Yo siempre tengo los bolsillos repletos de ellos, y *él* nunca; así que se limita a coger de los míos. Oh, señora Brook —continuó—, también conmigo (¡aunque yo gozo asimismo de una gran libertad!) se notaría.

—Supongo que me lo harías saber —repuso ella.

—Sí, te lo haría saber.

Entre ellos, tras esto, se produjo un rato de silencio; que la señora Brook fue la primera en romper:

—Esta tarde ella se ha ido con él (cumpliendo una cita solemne) al museo de South Kensington.

En este doliente anuncio de la señora Brook hubo algo que no obstante caracterizó la noticia como un portento tan grande que de nuevo él se sintió movido a hilaridad:

—Ah, ¿conque ahí es donde está ella? Entonces reconozco que me ha ganado por la mano. Él nunca me ha llevado *a mí* al museo de South Kensington.

—Antes has preguntado qué íbamos a hacer —siguió ella—. A lo que me refería (en lo tocante a Bayreuth) era a que para Nanda la cuestión se ha simplificado. Él la ha urgido para que vaya a hacerle una visita.

Fue notable el asenso de Vanderbank:

—Entiendo; así es que si al final os marcháis al extranjero, ella se queda lo suficientemente bien atendida gracias a esa invitación.

—Y gracias a cantidad de otras invitaciones.

Cosas así eran, en su mayoría, las que daban que pensar al joven:

—¿Quieres decir que la dejarías ir sola…?

—…¿adondequiera que la inviten? —dijo la señora Brook—. ¿Por qué no? No hables igual que la duquesa.

Durante unos instantes Vanderbank pareció esforzarse por no hacerlo:

—¿Es que el señor Longdon no podría acompañarla? ¿Por qué no?

Ante esto su amiga semejó realmente impresionada:

—Eso *sería* explotarlo. ¡Aunque por una hermosa causa! —meditó—. El único problema sería conseguir que también lo invitaran a él.

—Ah, pero ahí está el quid, ¿no te das cuenta? ¡Imagínate «conseguir» que el señor Longdon acceda a ir a alguna parte o a hacer alguna cosa, así por las buenas! ¿No comprendes —espetó Vanderbank— que la imposibilidad de ejercer en su beneficio esa clase de patrocinio le presta de inmediato categoría personal?

La señora Brook le dirigió a su compañero una de esas miradas caprichosas de casi agradecido aprecio con que muchas veces se veía iluminada su mutua relación incluso en las horas más oscuras:

—¿Como si fuese el embajador francés o el primado? Sí, tienes razón: sería imposible conseguirlo… aunque ello resulta muy extraño y una no acaba de entender por qué. Desde luego eso le presta categoría personal. Pero debido a ello se convierte precisamente en el tipo exacto de persona por quien a ella le resultaría más ventajoso ir acompañada. ¡Lástima —suspiró la señora Brook— que el señor Longdon no conozca a más gente!

—Oh, bueno, ya *estamos*, a nuestro modo, originando que eso ocurra. Sólo que no debemos precipitarlo. Déjalo en manos ríe la propia Nanda —añadió Vanderbank seguidamente; tras lo cual su compañera lo dejó tan manifiestamente en las manos filiales, que luego de un momento de silencio ésta abordó una muy distinta materia:

—Seguramente él te lo diría *a ti* (¿verdad?) si se decidiera a conferirle una suma considerable a Nanda.

Ella no había hecho más que obedecer la intimación de él, pero él se quedó mirando pasmado ante la longitud del salto de ella:

—Tal vez trataría de hacerlo, pero a mí no me gustaría en absoluto. —Inmediatamente se sintió movido a abandonar esta rama del tema y a, aparentemente para salir de apuros, asirse a otra—: ¿Dices que Nanda tiene entendido que el señor Longdon la ha invitado a visitarlo al pueblo durante una larga temporada?

La señora Brook apenas vaciló:

—Tiene entendido, creo, que lo que yo espero de ella es que se quede allí el mayor tiempo posible.

Vanderbank lanzó una carcajada —tal como aún era posible carcajearse incluso después de diez años— ante la infantil inocencia de que la voz de ella podía investir las más duras enseñanzas de la vida; después, con una pizca de nerviosismo en su propia voz y modales, él se levantó repentinamente de su asiento.

—¡Qué gran bendición resulta él para todos nosotros!

—Sí, pero piensa en lo que debemos de resultar nosotros *para él*.

—Una inmensa fuente de interés, no cabe duda. —Él dio algunos pasos sin propósito definido e, inclinándose sobre un cesto de flores, aspiró su aroma con violencia, casi sepultó el rostro—. Seguro que *somos* interesantes.

Él había hablado harto imprecisamente, pero la señora Brook podía dar una explicación exacta:

—Le hacemos un favor infinito. Lo mantenemos en contacto con viejos recuerdos.

Vanderbank se había llegado hasta una de las ventanas, sombreada desde afuera por un gran toldo a rayas bajo el cual y por entre los tiestos del balcón contempló un tramo de la lánguida calle ardiente. Permaneció un instante mirando estas cosas y exclamó:

—¡Cómo me gustan tus locuciones!

Ella hizo una pausa que desafió el tono masculino; entonces preguntó:

—¿Llamas una «locución» a mamá?

Él volvió a darse la vuelta, casi con exageración, pero enseguida, tras apartarse de la ventana, se detuvo:

—Seguro que los del grupo *debemos* plantearle cosas: a él le apetece planteárselas a sí mismo, o es capaz de hacerlo, en muy escasa medida.

—Exacto. Él se limita a actuar discretamente. Tal es su naturaleza, qué encanto de hombre. Nosotros debemos *permitirle* actuar.

Otra vez Vanderbank semejó reprimir una conciencia demasiado vivida del peculiar énfasis femenino:

—Sí, sí… debemos permitírselo.

—Si bien eso no impedirá que a Nanda, imagino —continuó su anfitriona—, no le parezca precisamente jacarandosa la diversión de estar en Beccles un mes entero… o lo que ella sea capaz de hacer durar su estancia.

Vanderbank ofreció el aspecto de medir cuánto podría la muchacha «hacerla durar», y dijo:

—El lugar será bastante aburrido, naturalmente, ¡pero cuando una persona le tiene tanto cariño a otra persona…!

—¿Como ella se lo tiene a él, quieres decir?

Él titubeó:

—Sí. En ese caso todo va bien siempre.

—¡Ella le *tiene* cariño, a Dios gracias! —dijo la señora Brook.

Ahora él se detuvo ante ella con la pinta de un hombre que de improviso ha determinado dar un gran salto a ciegas:

—¿Sabes lo que ha hecho el señor Longdon? Desea tantísimo que me case con ella que ha propuesto ofrecer un apoyo concreto.

La señora Brook se irguió inmediatamente:

—¿«Propuesto»? ¿A *ella*?

—No, creo que no le ha dicho ni una palabra a Nanda: de hecho estoy seguro de que, muy adecuadamente, no piensa hacerlo. Pero habló conmigo la noche del domingo en Mertle: allí tuve una sustanciosa charla a solas con él, ya entrada la noche, en el salón de fumar. —La mirada fija de la señora Brook era seria, y ahora Vanderbank prosiguió como si el sonido de su propia voz lo ayudara a afrontarla—: Ventilamos muchísimas cuestiones y fue extraordinaria su gentileza: es el más admirable niño viejo que nunca ha existido. No sé, ahora que me paro a reflexionarlo, si tengo derecho a contártelo… y desde luego lo informaré inmediatamente de que te lo *he* contado; pero me da la impresión de que no lograré llegar a ningún tipo de postura respetable sobre el particular sin hacerte partícipe de mis confidencias… que es lo que en realidad he venido a hacer aquí hoy, aunque hasta el momento he tenido pavor de ello.

Podía ser igualmente, según los amigos decidieran considerarlo, una ventaja o un inconveniente de conversar con la señora Brook el hecho de que, ya que en cualquier momento el rostro de ésta exhibía toda la aflicción del mundo, era inevitable permanecer desinformados del efecto concreto de cualquier detalle particular. Por consiguiente, en el presente análisis que Vanderbank realizó de los indicios hubo algo que demostró que él había tenido que aprender a tantear la senda y más o menos había acabado dominando tal arte. En realidad la circunstancia de que se hubiera puesto un poco pálida era la única señal inequívoca.

—¿«Pavor» de ello? ¿Por qué diantres…? —Los colores masculinos, por el contrario, se intensificaron ante el tono femenino, que implicaba suficientemente que había obrado como un estúpido—: ¿Quieres decir que has rehusado ese pacto?

Durante unos momentos él se limitó, con una sonrisa algo impostada, a continuar mirándola; al final, empero, cobró clara conciencia, y no le importó demasiado, de estar percatándose de cada vez más cosas:

—Eres magnífica. Eres magnífica.

Los preciosos ojos femeninos se abrieron desmesuradamente:

—*Comment done?* ¿En qué, para qué? ¿*Has* rechazado a mi hija? —insistió. Tras lo cual, como él respondiera tan sólo con un lento movimiento de cabeza que pareció decir que de momento las cosas no eran tan simples, ella tuvo una de esas inspiraciones a que era propensa por naturaleza—: ¿Es que supones que te quiero para mí sola?

—Querida señora Brook, eres tan formidable —repuso riéndose— que si por un acaso me quisieras para ti sola, palabra de honor que no veo cómo yo podría no decir: «Conforme». —Después habló con mayor seriedad—: Si sentía recelo de revelarte lo que me había sobrevenido, era debido a una razón que por descontado tengo que afrontar abiertamente. Con independencia de lo que quieras para ti sola, quieres a Mitchy para Nanda.

—Entiendo, entiendo. —Le hizo plena justicia a la explicación de él—. Y ¿qué decías de un «apoyo»? ¿Ese bendito hombre se ofrece a donar…?

—Eres una mujer maravillosa —respondió su visitante— y tu perspicacia traspasa barreras de un modo que, cuando me vences, deja completamente abochornada a la mía. Cuando el señor Longdon me reveló sus intenciones, yo me sentí absolutamente sorprendido.

—¿Y yo —preguntó la señora Brook— no me he sorprendido ni pizca? ¿No se deberá únicamente —sugirió con humildad— a que lo he calado mejor que tú? ¿De veras no sabías que él lo *haría*? —preguntó con voz vibrante.

Vanderbank meditó o por lo menos aparentó meditar:

—¿Que él me convertiría *a mí* en la condición? ¿Cómo podía yo estar seguro?

Pero ella se olvidó de contestar su pregunta debido a la paulatina claridad:

—Ah, conque la condición es que seas únicamente tú…

—Ahí, en cualquier caso, reside mi única posibilidad de colaborar. Él está dispuesto a conferir una donación si yo estoy dispuesto a hacer todo lo demás.

—¿A declararte formalmente a ella, quieres decir? —Ella aguardó unos momentos, pero, como él no dijera nada, continuó—: Y no estás dispuesto. ¿Se trata de eso?

—Estoy tomándome mi tiempo.

—Por supuesto ya sabes —dijo la señora Brook— que Nanda te aceptaría entusiasmada.

Ahora él le volvió la espalda, pero tras dar unos cuantos pasos retomó junto a ella:

—O sea que lo admites.

Ella titubeó:

—Sólo *ante ti*.

Él esbozó una extraña sonrisa desmayada:

—¡Bueno, puesto que yo nunca hablo de ello…!

—No: sólo ante mí. ¿Qué suma va a conferir? —requirió la señora Brook.

—No sabría decirte.

—¿No se la preguntaste?

—Todo lo contrario, tuve que hacerlo callársela.

—Oh, entonces —protestó la señora Brook— eso es lo que yo llamaría rehusar el pacto.

Por unos momentos aquellas palabras parecieron impresionar a su compañero:

—¿Lo es, lo es? —repitió casi ensimismado. Pero al siguiente instante ya se había libertado de sus propias cavilaciones, estaba lo que en Buckingham Crescent se llamaría con los cinco sentidos alerta—: ¿No es revelador que yo haya considerado mi deber prevenirte de que definitivamente soy su candidato?

Impacientada, la señora Brook le volvió la espalda:

—¡Desde luego se te ocurren (cuando hablas de «prevenirme») las más felices expresiones! —Sumió entre las flores el rostro, tal como había hecho él previamente; luego, al alzarlo, preguntó—: ¿Qué clase de monstruo estás tratando de decirme que soy?

—Mi querida amiga —Vanderbank fue raudo—, realmente no creo estar diciendo sino lo justo. Por lo demás, ¿no es precisamente mi devoción por ti lo que en este caso me ha hecho excederme en mi prudencia?

Con la cabeza ella hizo un ademán negativo de mera desesperación atemperada:

—Eso de «devoción» vuelve a ser exquisito. La diplomacia masculina posee un encanto inimitable. Y tú resultas sobresaliente —continuó— incluso teniendo en cuenta lo lejos que suelen llegar los hombres.

Ahora él se rió de forma un tanto desmañada, como si definitivamente ella hubiera logrado incomodarlo:

—Contigo tarde o temprano siempre termino dándome cuenta de que los hombres no llegan nada lejos… en la dirección que a ti te agradaría; pero ¿cómo es que yo, a fin de cuentas, soy tan archidestacado cuando *has* apostado por otro hombre?

—¿Insistes en volver sobre ello? —suspiró ella fatigadamente.

Él recapacitó unos instantes:

—No, en tal caso. No tienes más que prohibírmelo y jamás hablaré otra vez sobre ello.

—Estarás en extrañas condiciones para hablar sobre ello si en realidad piensas dar el paso que te piden. Niegas haber rehusado el pacto —dijo la señora Brook—; lo cual significa, en consecuencia, que has dejado abrigar esperanzas a nuestro amigo.

Vanderbank lo afrontó con sangre fría:

—Sí, creo que abriga esperanzas.

—Y ¿se las transmite a mi hija?

Esto dejó callado al joven, pero sólo un momento:

—Tengo la más plena fe en su discreción para con ella. Confío en su especial sabiduría. La quiere —añadió enseguida— incluso más que nosotros.

La señora Brook desvió la mirada hacia el infinito del espacio.

—«Nosotros», mi querido Van —replicó por último—, es uno de tus antológicos toques inimitables. Pero hay algo de verdad en lo que dices: *he* estado, en confianza entre nosotros (entre él y yo), alentando a Mitchy. Me refiero a que he estado diciéndole: «Espera, espera; por lo menos no des ningún paso en otra dirección». Sólo que justamente es debido a la hondura de mi preocupación por la felicidad de mi hija por lo que me he aferrado a ese recurso. Mitchy haría cualquier cosa por ella tan absoluta y desprendidamente. —Ahora ella había alcanzado, dentro de su extraordinario autocontrol, el clímax de una mansa efusión benigna—. Quiero que la pobre criatura, *que diable*, cuente con una flecha de repuesto en su carcaj y un bollo de reserva, cuando llegue su desolada ancianidad, en la despensa. Cuando todo lo demás haya fallado, Mitchy seguirá al pie del cañón. ¡Entonces por lo menos será exclusivamente culpa de ella…! —insistió la señora Brook—. ¿Qué puede dispensarme del deber básico de lomar precauciones —resumió— si sé con tanta certidumbre como que estoy aquí mirándote…?

—Sí, ¿el qué? —preguntó él al quedarse callada.

—Caramba, pues que en la medida en que ellos cuentan contigo, cuentan, mi querido Van, con un espejismo. —Cautivándolo un instante como con la suave voz baja del destino, triste pero firmemente ella realizó un ademán negativo—: No te casarás con mi hija. —¡No me digas! —exclamó él en voz casi demasiado alta. —No te casarás con mi hija —insistió.

—*¡Canastos!* —Él se lo tomó a broma.

—No te casarás con mi hija —reiteró.

Fue como si por fin no pudiera menos que mostrarse realmente sobrecogido; sin embargo lo que a continuación espetó fue lo que en verdad podía haberlo impresionado más:

—¡*Eres* magnífica, de veras!

—¡El señor Mitchett! —anunció casi irrespetuosamente el mayordomo, apareciendo en la puerta; ante lo cual Vanderbank se volvió inmediatamente hacia la persona anunciada.

Allí estaba el señor Mitchett y, anticipándose a la señora Brook en darle la bienvenida, su amigo le comunicó sin variantes:

—¡Ella es magnífica!

Al momento Mitchy fue todo interés:

—¡Ya lo creo! Pero ¿cuál ha sido su última gesta?

Su última gesta había sido, aunque grandiosa, tan sutil, como se decía en Buckingham Crescent, que Vanderbank apenas supo cómo explicarla:

—Pues que ella es absolutamente suprema.

—¡Oh, a quién has ido a decírselo! —exclamó Mitchy mientras la saludaba.

XXII

Entretanto la destinataria de todo este encomio había vuelto a acomodarse en su sofá, donde recibió el homenaje de su nuevo visitante.

—Yo no soy magnífica, qué va; es el querido señor Longdon quien sí lo es. Acabo de recibir por intermedio de Van la más maravillosa noticia relacionada con él: su manifestación de su deseo de convertir en apetecible para alguien el casarse con mi hija.

—¿«Convertirlo» en apetecible? —Mitchy se quedó atónito—. ¿Es que acaso no lo *es*?

—Mi querido amigo, pregunta a Van. Por supuesto tú siempre has opinado así. Pero debo decirte, con todo y eso —siguió la señora Brook—, que me dejas encantada.

El propio Mitchy ya había tomado asiento, pero Vanderbank permanecía de pie e incluso se había puesto un tanto tieso. No estaba enfadado —nadie del círculo más íntimo de Buckingham Crescent se enfadaba nunca— pero se lo veía serio y algo atribulado.

—Aunque *fuese* algo indudablemente positivo —encaró directamente a su anfitriona—, no acabo de entender por qué haces *esto*. Me refiero a divulgarlo de inmediato.

—Huy, pero ¿es que alguna vez le ocultamos algo a Mitchy? —preguntó la señora Brook.

—¿Es que alguna vez *podéis* ocultarme algo? Viene a ser lo mismo —dijo Mitchy—. Por lo demás, henos aquí juntos, unidos en todo: una sola gran inteligencia. Es claro que ese «alguien» del señor Longdon es Van. No intentéis tratarme como si fuese un extraño.

Una pizca estrafalariamente, aunque ello no fue más que la sombra de una sombra, Vanderbank paseó su mirada de uno a otra:

—¡Creo que más bien he sido un asno!

—En ese caso, dados los términos de nuestra amistad (como muy bien dice Mitchy), ¿qué podemos él y yo tener mayor derecho a saber y a compadecer? Naturalmente desearás, Mitchy, ¿no es cierto? —continuó la señora Brook—, enterarte de todo lo relacionado con *eso*.

—Oh, únicamente aludía —explicó Vanderbank— a que lo soy por haberte revelado mi secreto hace un instante. Sin embargo, por supuesto soy consciente —continuó para Mitchy— de que lo que hablemos entre nosotros, sólo entre nosotros quedará. Conque voy a contarte yo mismo de qué va exactamente todo el asunto. —La duración de la pausa que hizo a continuación terminó evidenciando que se había quedado cortado; ante lo cual sus compañeros, mientras aguardaban, intercambiaron una mirada de entendimiento. Aguardaron un rato más, y luego él se dejó caer en una silla donde, echado hacia adelante, con los codos sobre los brazos del asiento y con la mirada fija en la alfombra, prolongó fi silencio. Por último miró a la señora Brook—: Acláralo *tú*.

Por alguna razón esta solicitud despertó en ella su tono más pueril:

—Creo que no *puedo*, querido Van, ofrecer una aclaración realmente *clara*. A estas alturas, sin embargo —continuó para Mitchy—, tú ya estarás bastante informado sobre el señor Longdon y mamá.

—¡Oh, ya lo creo! —exclamó Mitchy riéndose.

—Y sobre mamá y Nanda.

—Oh, absolutamente: el modo como Nanda se la recuerda y la «hermosa devoción» que lo ha hecho tomarle tal cariño a Nanda. Pero ya he adivinado la situación; no hace falta que pongáis los puntos sobre las íes. —Dedicándole otra mirada a su compañero de visita, Mitchy se irguió de repente y permaneció allí rubicundo—: Te ha ofrecido dinero a cambio de casarte con ella. —Le dijo esto a Vanderbank como si fuera la cosa más natural del mundo.

—Huy, *no* —intervino la señora Brook con presteza—; simplemente le ha comunicado antes que a ningún otro que el dinero está ahí *para* Nanda y que por consiguiente…

—…¿el primero que llegue se queda con el premio? —había completado ya Mitchy las palabras de ella

—. Entiendo, entiendo. Entonces, para asegurar el destino del dinero —le inquirió a Vanderbank—, ¿*debes* casarte con ella?

—Si de eso depende todo, ella nunca lo recibirá —respondió la señora Brook—. El querido Van meditará concienzudamente sobre ello, pero no se casará con mi hija.

—¿De veras no lo harás, Van? —preguntó Mitchy desde la alfombrilla de chimenea.

—Jamás, jamás. Nosotros seremos muy gentiles con él, lo ayudaremos, confiaremos y rezaremos por él, pero al final seguiremos —dijo la señora Brook— en el mismo punto en que estamos ahora. El querido Van habrá hecho todo lo posible, y nosotros habremos hecho todo lo posible. El señor Longdon habrá hecho todo lo posible; incluso la pobre Nanda habrá hecho todo lo posible. Pero todo habrá sido en vano. No obstante —continuó exponiendo la señora Brook—, probablemente ella sí recibirá el dinero. A buen seguro el señor Longdon considerará que si ella no se casa lo necesitará aún más que si se casa. Conque por lo menos *eso* —concluyó— habremos (quiero decir Edward y yo y la chiquilla) salido ganando.

Para llegar a una certidumbre comparable, Mitchy no precisó más que un instante de reflexión:

—Huy, no cabe duda acerca de *eso*. ¡No son moco de pavo las cosas respecto de las cuales ya podéis respirar tranquilos!… —explicó animadamente.

—¡Desde luego ello significa mucho! —suspiró desahogadamente la señora Brook. Luego dijo en un tono diferente—: Lo que al final el querido Van descubrirá que no puede soportar será, ¿no te das cuenta?, precisamente la posibilidad de parecer haber aceptado un soborno. No querrá, por una parte (por consideración hacia Nanda), impedir que ella reciba el dinero; pero por otra no querrá que la cuestión pecuniaria aparezca mezclada en el asunto… dar la impresión, en definitiva, de que haya hecho falta pagarlo. Se parece a ti, ¿sabes?: es un orgulloso; y ahí será donde nos estrellaremos.

Mitchy había estado escudriñando a su amigo, quien, visiblemente turbado unos minutos atrás, ahora se había recobrado y, a sus anchas, aunque quizá con una sonrisa algo impostada, estaba recostado en su asiento y dejaba vagar la mirada por todas partes excepto por los semblantes de sus compañeros. Saltaba a la vista que en este momento Vanderbank deseaba hacer gala de un bienhumorado desapego.

—Vamos a ver —le dijo Mitchy—, recuerdo que una vez sí propusiste a mi consideración un caso no poco delicado.

—Oh, Van lo propondrá a tu consideración… lo propondrá incluso a *mi* consideración —espetó la señora Brook—. Se mostrará fascinante, conmovedor, comunicativo… sobre todo se mostrará endiabladamente *interesante* en relación con ello. Pero tomará su decisión atendiendo a su propio criterio, y su propio criterio no será complacer al señor Longdon.

Mitchy continuó escrutando a su compañero a la luz de estos comentarios, luego orientó su cordial mirada saltona hacia su anfitriona diciendo:

—Es espléndido, ¿verdad?, el encaprichamiento del viejales con él.

La señora Brook vaciló:

—¿Desde el punto de vista del inmenso interés que (en este preciso instante, sin ir más lejos) genera en ti y en mí? Oh sí, es una de las mejores cosas que hemos visto jamás. En cierto modo eso lo equipara a Lady Fanny: «¡La adinerará, no la adinerará… no la adinerará, la adinerará!». Sólo que, para ser perfecto, a todo esto le falta, como digo, el ingrediente de un verdadero suspense.

Mitchy semejó francamente asombrado:

—¿Todo esto carece de suspense, crees tú? No para mí; nanay. —Casi suplicantemente se volvió otra vez hacia su amigo—: Y espero que tampoco para ti.

Cultivando su desapego, al principio Vanderbank no dio más respuesta que si no hubiese oído, y entretanto sus compañeros exhibieron semblantes que acaso dieron menos fe de una ausencia de ansiedad de lo que lo habían hecho sus respectivos discursos. La única manifestación que de momento hizo fue incorporarse y acercarse a Mitchy, ante el cual permaneció un instante riendo bastante educadamente pero de un modo no enteramente alegre. Luego, como para ofrecer una mejor prueba de alegría, pasó a asirlo por los hombros y, sin hablar aún, lo empujó hasta acomodarlo en el asiento que él mismo acababa de abandonar. Desde el sofá, mientras tenía lugar esto, la mirada de la señora Brook permaneció fija en los visitantes. Vanderbank, mientras se paseaba por la estancia y sus compañeros aguardaban, tardó un instante más en dar rienda suelta a lo que llevaba en sus pensamientos.

—Lo que *es* espléndido, como decimos nosotros —declaró al fin—, es esta extraordinaria libertad y buen humor de nuestra conversación y el hecho de que nos preocupemos de veras (con tal independencia de nuestros intereses privados, con tan escaso egoísmo o cualquier otra vulgaridad) por llegar al fondo de las cosas. El hermoso ejemplo que hace un rato me dio de esto la señora Brook —siguió para Mitchy— fue lo que me hizo exclamar admirativamente ante ti refiriéndome a ella en cuanto entraste. —Él hablaba a uno

de sus amigos, pero miraba al otro—. Lo que hay de verdaderamente «supremo» en ella es que, aunque de pronto yo le venga con una interferencia sobre un plan muy querido, su resentimiento personal es nulo: todo lo que desea es entender lo que puede acabar ocurriendo, penetrar la esencia de los acontecimientos y extraer conclusiones. Ella me brinda la verdad, tal como la ve ella, sobre mí mismo, pero sin ningún regocijo perverso aunque dé la casualidad de ser la verdad que más la beneficia. Esto sí que es un mandoble hechicero y lo demás son cuentos.

En Mitchy el aprecio no fue óbice para la diversión:

—Estás cargado de razón en lo que se refiere a nosotros. Pero no por ello deja de ser un mandoble.

Aunque la señora Brook se sentía menos divertida, acaso había seguido aquello con mayor atención:

—Si resulta que me haces tanta justicia, ¿por qué me dirigiste una pregunta tan fría y cruel? Me refiero a cuando me increpaste tan grotescamente por participarle tus noticias a Mitchy. Si la más elevada belleza del esfuerzo por compartir nuestras existencias está (según tu propia elocuencia, recuérdalo) en nuestra sinceridad, lo que hice fue sencillamente obedecer el impulso de hacer algo sincero. Si no somos sinceros, no somos nada.

—¡Nada! —fue Mitchy quien primero reaccionó—. Pero somos sinceros.

—Sí, *somos* sinceros —dijo Vanderbank a continuación—. Para nosotros es una gran fortuna no haber caído por debajo de nuestro propio nivel; por consiguiente no hay duda de que proseguiremos remontándonos hacia cumbres inigualadas. Pagamos por ello, dice la gente que no nos aprecia, en el fondo de nuestra conciencia…

—Pero la gente que no nos aprecia —atajó Mitchy— no tiene importancia. Además, ¿cómo podemos llegar al fondo de nuestra conciencia…?

—¡Bien dicho! —Vanderbank completó aquella idea—: ¿…sin que yo me encuentre a mí mismo, sin ir más lejos, en ti y en la señora Brook? Nos vemos reflejados a nosotros mismos; somos conscientes de la fascinante totalidad. Te doy las gracias —siguió para la señora Brook tras un instante—, te doy las gracias por tu sinceridad.

A veces costaba un enorme trabajo retener los ojos de ella, pero éstos tenían, hay que decirlo en su favor, sus momentos de quietud. Ella intercambió con Vanderbank una mirada un tanto notable; luego, con un estilo peculiar e intransferible, bruscamente interrumpió esta comunión pero sin parecer olvidarse de él:

—Lo importante es, ¿no te parece? —apeló a Mitchy—, que no nos volvamos tan deslumbrantemente inteligentes como para hacer creer que jamás podríamos ser sencillos. No debemos discernir cosas *demasiado* portentosas… ni siquiera dentro de nosotros mismos. —Casi perdió la serenidad ante el peligro que examinaba—: ¡*Podemos* ser sencillos!

—¡*Podemos*, por todos los santos! —exclamó riendo Mitchy.

—Bueno, ahora mismo estamos siéndolo… y es un gran consuelo dejar eso claro —dijo Vanderbank.

—Pues entonces ya ves —replicó la señora Brook— qué error cometerías discerniendo abismos de frío cálculo en el hecho de que yo haya sido meramente espontánea.

—¡*Podemos* ser espontáneos! —declaró Mitchy.

—¡Podemos, por todos los santos! —exclamó riendo Vanderbank.

La señora Brook se había vuelto hacia Mitchy:

—Sencillamente quería que tú estuvieras al corriente. Así que lo divulgué de inmediato. En ello no hay nada más complicado que eso. En cuanto a *por qué* quería que tú estuvieras al corriente…

—¿Qué mejor razón podría haber —atajó Mitchy— que estás llena a rebosar de la conciencia de cuánto querría yo mismo estar al corriente y de la miseria, el absoluto *pathos*, de mi permanencia en la ignorancia? ¡Imagínate, mi querido camarada —no le quedaba sino planteárselo a Vanderbank—, mi *no* estar al corriente!

Saltaba a la vista que Vanderbank no podía imaginárselo, pero dijo con bastante aplomo:

—Probablemente te habría informado yo mismo.

—Y ¿cuál es la diferencia?

—Oh, *hay* una diferencia —dijo la señora Brook, sincera. Después abrió una o dos pulgadas, en beneficio de Vanderbank, la puerta de su turbia brillantez—: Sólo que yo la habría considerado una diferencia en sentido positivo. Claro está que —agregó— todo esto quedará exclusivamente entre nosotros tres y, gracias a ello, ¿no sentís ya el intenso hechizo de que (unidos en tomo a ello) estemos juntos?

Fue como si cada uno de los dos hombres esperase que el otro asintiera mejor de lo que él mismo habría podido hacerlo, y entonces Mitchy, como Vanderbank callara, elegantemente debió, para escudarlo, cambiar de tema:

—Pero ¿no debería estar al corriente Nanda, que es la persona más directamente involucrada?

Ante esto Vanderbank emitió un raro sonido de hilaridad:

—¡Huy, eso sería la hecatombe!

Durante unos segundos esto produjo algo semejante a un escalofrío: un escalofrío que tuvo como consecuencia un silencio momentáneo que a su vez dio más peso a las palabras pronunciadas seguidamente.

—No seré yo quien la informe —dijo la señora Brook suave pero concluyentemente—. ¡He dicho! Podéis estar seguros. Si deseáis una promesa, esto es una promesa. Conque si el señor Longdon guarda silencio —prosiguió—, e igual haces tú, Mitchy, e igual hago yo, ¿cómo diantre podrá ella sospechar nada?

—Naturalmente querrás decir a menos que Van decida informarla él mismo.

Van habría podido ser, teniendo en cuenta el modo en que ellos lo miraron, algún hermoso objeto inconsciente, mas la señora Brook fue muy pronta en replicar:

—Oh, pobre hombre, *él* nunca dirá una palabra.

—Entiendo. Pues helo ahí.

A esta discusión no tuvo de momento nada que aportar el protagonista de la misma, ni siquiera cuando Mitchy, alzándose de la silla en que había sido confinado a la vez que pronunciaba aquellas últimas palabras, cordialmente se ubicó también, sobre la alfombrilla de chimenea, ante la anfitriona. Por lo visto este desplazamiento no hizo sino intensificar el silencio de Vanderbank, pues fue sin hablar aún como, tras unos momentos, este último se apartó de su amigo y volvió a dejarse caer en el asiento de marras.

—Antes de ahora, como supongo recordarás, ya te he demostrado —le dijo Vanderbank finalmente al otro— que soy plenamente consciente de lo mucho que la señora Brook te preferiría *a ti* para ocupar el puesto.

—Van está convencido de que lo quiero para mí sola —aclaró benignamente la señora Brook.

Lo cierto es que ella era, como siempre la consideraban ellos, «portentosa», pero acaso ni siquiera ahora lo fue tanto como Mitchy se descubrió capaz de serlo:

—Pero ¿cómo ibas a perder al querido Van… incluso en el peor de los casos? —le preguntó seriamente.

Ella vaciló:

—¿Qué entiendes por el peor de los casos?

—Entonces incluso en el mejor de los casos —sonrió Mitchy—. En el caso de que él incumpla tu predicción; la cual, dicho sea de paso, entraña el riesgo, ¿verdad? (quiero decir para tu prestigio intelectual), de volverlo, como nuestras niñeras nos llamaban a todos, «respondón».

—Oh, ya he pensado en eso —repuso la señora Brook—. Pero Van no hará, en términos globales, ni siquiera por el gusto de dejarme con un palmo de narices, lo que no querrá hacer. *Yo* no he dicho que vaya a perderlo —prosiguió—; eso no es más que la visión que él mismo tiene… o más bien, para hacerle perfecta justicia, la idea que candorosamente me imputa a mí aunque sin, me imagino (pues hasta tan lejos no llego), atribuirme nada tan inenarrablemente *bête* como un sentimiento de celos.

—Ni en sueños pensarías que supongo de ti algo inapropiado —dijo Vanderbank ante aquello— si comprendieras plenamente hasta qué punto persevero en mi admiración hacia ti. Sólo que lo que me deja un poco estupefacto —insistió— es la extraordinaria libertad crítica (o, si queremos, podemos llamarla la elevada objetividad intelectual) con que discutimos una cuestión que te toca, querida señora Brook, tan de cerca e involucra de tal modo tus más íntimos y sagrados sentimientos. ¿Con qué estamos jugando, a fin de cuentas, sino con la futura felicidad de Nanda?

—¡Oh, yo no estoy jugando! —declaró la señora Brook con un leve estertor de emoción.

—Ella no está jugando —lo confirmó con gravedad el señor Mitchett—. ¿No percibes en el mismísimo ambiente la vibración de esa pasión que sencillamente ella es demasiado delicada para colgar públicamente en la ventana como una ama de casa cuelga el mantel o un chauvinista la bandera nacional? —Entonces recogió las palabras que con anterioridad había dicho Vanderbank—: Naturalmente, mi querido amigo, yo soy «consciente», como dices tú, de todo, y no cometo una indiscreción, ¿verdad, señora Brook?, al admitir en tu nombre tanto como en el mío propio que *hay* una imposibilidad que a veces hemos discutido tú y yo. Sólo que (¡Dios nos bendiga a todos!) no es que desde hace mucho tiempo yo no haya comprendido que aquí no hay nada *para* mí.

—¡Eh, un momento, un momento! —intervino la señora Brook.

—Ella tiene la teoría —Vanderbank, desde su silla, se lo aclaró a Mitchy, quien se cernía ante ellos— de que tu oportunidad *llegará*, más tarde, tras de que yo haya revelado mi verdadera disposición.

—¡Ah, pero eso es precisamente —respondió Mitchy con prontitud— lo que jamás harás! «Más tarde» caminarás envuelto en un magnífico misterio no menos de lo que lo haces actualmente: seguirás disfrutando de la ventaja de todo aquello con que nuestra imaginación, perpetuamente absorta, a menudo desconcertada y nunca harta, seguirá engalanándote. De idéntico modo, Nanda, hasta el final de sus días, se

limitará a continuar siendo poética, o coherente, o desprendida, o lo que se nos antoje llamarla. Para nosotros, que en comparación somos chabacanos, puede suponer alguna diferencia, pero ¿qué diferencia supondrá *para ella* tanto como si te decantas por ella como si no? Ella no puede poseerte, en su interior, en medida mayor de lo que ya te posee; y precisamente dicha medida es tan enorme que no queda sitio para nadie más. ¿Dónde, por consiguiente, sin tal sitio, quepo yo?

—En ningún sitio, está claro —pareció musitar servicialmente Vanderbank.

La señora Brook había escuchado a Mitchy con notoria admiración, pero ante esto le dedicó a Van una mirada que fue como la caída de un brote de la misma rama:

—Ah, en tal caso, ¿estaré siempre en este plan con *ambos* de vosotros? ¡Eso será ameno! —Ella tuvo, empero, a renglón seguido, una súbita mudanza que matizó el cuadro—: Eres tan divino, Mitchy, que ¿cómo podrías no conquistar, a la larga, el corazón de *cualquier* mujer?

No es que Mitchy se sintiera impresionado; únicamente fue que se mostró cortés:

—¿Qué quieres decir con eso de «a la larga»? ¿Perseverar hasta que yo haya cumplido ochenta años?

—Oh, tu genio es de una especie que ganará muchísimo al llegar a la edad madura. Entonces cosecharás de un modo u otro, piensa una, todo lo que has sembrado.

Mitchy siguió aceptando aquella profecía sólo para desacreditarla:

—¿A tener ochenta años lo llamas la edad madura? Quia, mi belleza interior, querida amiga (si eso es lo que entiendes por mi genio), es precisamente mi maldición. ¿Qué diantres cosecha un hombre implado de bondad? La bondad vuelve necesario el tipo de aprecio que vuelve innecesarios todos los demás tipos de aprecio.

—¡Pues mira: eso *es* una paradoja barata! —suspiró Vanderbank sufridamente—. Quedas penalizado con una multa.

Acaso fue menos sufridamente como la señora Brook ratificó:

—Sí, en eso *somos* inflexibles. Cinco libras, si no te importa.

Mitchy sacó su cartera, si bien explicó:

—Lo que quiero decir es que yo no genero lo fundamental. —Tras lo cual extrajo un crujiente billete.

—¿Ah, *no*? —preguntó Vanderbank, quien, habiéndole cogido el billete para alargárselo a la señora Brook, lo conservó un momento, gentilmente, para recalcar su incredulidad.

—Lo fundamental es el terror sagrado. Eres tú quien genera *eso*.

—¡Ah! —Y Vanderbank depositó el dinero sobre la mesita que había junto al codo de la señora Brook.

—¿No tengo razón, señora Brook? ¿Acaso Van no lo genera, tremendamente, y acaso no es el terror sagrado lo que funciona mejor que ninguna otra cosa?

Nuevamente los dos, cual si estuviesen conchabados, contemplaron en una comunidad de interés a su compañero, que soportó esto con una pinta que manifiestamente pretendía ser el feliz término medio entre la turbación y el triunfo. Luego la señora Brook patentizó haberle gustado aquella expresión:

—¡El terror sagrado! Sí, servidora lo percibe. *Es* eso.

—El mejor ejemplo de ello —prosiguió Mitchy— que he visto jamás. Mi alegato queda, pues, suficientemente consolidado.

—Huy, no me parece que pueda decirse que haya quedado así —replicó Vanderbank— hasta que le hayas puesto un lacito rosa haciendo por Nanda lo que ella más anhela que hagas.

Mitchy comprendió aquello sin ningún asomo de extrañeza:

—Oh, ¿pidiéndole a la duquesa la mano de la pequeña Aggie? —No dedicó sino un instante a meditarlo —: Bueno, yo *sería* capaz de pedírsela, para complacer a Nanda. Sólo que nunca he comprendido del todo la razón de su anhelo.

—En gran parte la razón es —contestó su amigo— que, teniéndole mucho aprecio a Aggie, y de hecho admirándola extremadamente, Nanda desea hacer algo bueno por ella y apartarla de cualquier cosa mala. ¿Es que no sabes que (es realmente enternecedor) literalmente Nanda le rinde culto a Aggie?

Mitchy, con toda su percatación, vibró ante aquel toque:

—Sí, ¿no es realmente enternecedor?

—Pues bien —continuó Vanderbank—, para su amiga captura a un fénix como tú, y para ti captura a una fénix como su amiga. Sería arduo decir por quién de los dos se esfuerza más en realizar la buena acción. En resumidas cuentas os quiere mucho a ambos —siguió desarrollando la idea—, aunque tal vez, si se piensa en ello, el valor que te atribuye a ti, Mitchy, en la operación, es ligeramente más alto. En todo caso son rematadamente hermosos (y asimismo rematadamente chocantes) sus sentimientos hacia la tipología de Aggie, que está separada de la suya propia por abismos infranqueables.

—¡Huy —exclamó riendo Mitchy—, pues entonces piensa en sus sentimientos hacia la mía!

Aún más serenado ahora y con la cabeza echada hacia atrás, Vanderbank miró alto y lejos:

—¡Ah, en Nanda hay cada elemento…! —Ante esto sus compañeros intercambiaron una mirada, mientras él agregaba—: A decir verdad la pequeña Aggie es el tipo de criatura que a ella le habría gustado ser capaz de ser.

—Pues bien —dijo Mitchy—, yo la habría adorado incluso si ella *hubiese* sido capaz.

Durante algunos minutos, la señora Brook no había representado ningún papel audible, mas en ella quizá el agudo observador que constantemente estamos dando por supuesto habría advertido, a guisa de uno de los efectos del especial carácter hoy de la presencia de Vanderbank, cierta irritación sofocada.

—Ella jamás habría sido capaz —intervino ahora—, teniendo una madre tan negligente… o más bien, para decirlo con mayor propiedad, tan perversa.

—Y no obstante, mi querida amiga —reflexionó Mitchy con presteza—, en el caso de la pequeña Aggie, no es que la duquesa se haya abstenido…

La señora Brook estaba henchida de sabiduría:

—Vaya, eso es algo bien diferente. Yo no soy, como madre (¿a que no, Van?), *suficientemente* mala. Eso es lo que me pasa. Aggie, ¿no os dais cuenta?, es la virtud y la moralidad de la duquesa; las cuales, teniéndolas de ese modo fuera de una, como si dijéramos, son mucho más llevaderas. Para Jane la chiquilla ha sido, lo reconozco, un trabajillo mayúsculo, pero Jane la ha gobernado con mano firme y la ha conformado como una maravillosa labor de costura. ¡Oh, como bordado, es de un *soigné*! Hela ahí, lista para ser exhibida. Una mujer como yo tiene que ser *ella misma*, pobre criatura, su propia virtud y su propia moralidad. ¿Qué queréis que os diga? Es nuestra abrumadora idiosincrasia inglesa.

—Así es que aun en el mejor de los casos la hija de una mujer como tú —sintonizó Mitchy— ¿sólo puede, por regla de tres, esperar convertirse en el vicio y la inmoralidad de su madre?

Pero la señora Brook, sin contestar a la pregunta, parecía haberse sumido de repente en un mar de pensamientos.

—La única forma —dijo— de que Nanda hubiese sido *realmente* presentable…

—…¿habría sido que tú fueras como Jane?

Durante un instante Mitchy y su anfitriona parecieron, ante esto, contemplar juntos una trágica verdad. Luego ella cabeceó pesarosa:

—Siempre nos damos cuenta de nuestros errores demasiado tarde. —Ella repitió el gesto, como para desentenderse de todo, y mientras tanto Vanderbank, sacando su reloj, se había puesto en pie con una carcajada que revelaba cierta desatención y le había dirigido a Mitchy un comentario al efecto de marcharse juntos. Mitchy, momentáneamente ocupado con la señora Brook, había asentido con una mera inclinación de cabeza, mas la actitud de los dos hombres se había transformado en la de una despedida. Su amiga los miró como si desease retener a uno de ellos, por alguna razón relacionada de alguna manera con el otro, pero estuviese extrañamente, casi ridículamente indecisa a la hora de escoger. Lo que de hecho hubo en el rostro femenino durante este breve pasaje habría podido resultar ser, si hubiésemos escarbado, el destello de la sensación de que, a despecho de cualquier intimidad y cordialidad, ellos dos sólo podrían estar, en el fondo y según solían salir las cosas, unidos en contra de ella. Sin embargo, por fin hizo una especie de elección prosiguiendo para Mitchy—: Van no te ha contado en absoluto la verdadera razón del anhelo de Nanda de que te cases con Aggie.

—Oh, eso me parece territorio vedado —dijo Vanderbank—. Además, él la sabe muy bien.

Mitchy sacó a la luz, sin dilaciones, lo que había dentro de sí mismo y de todos:

—Caramba, que así Nanda me aleja, ¿no es cierto?

Ahora inquieto y paseándose por la estancia, Vanderbank se detuvo, al oír aquello, dirigiéndole una sonrisa a la señora Brook:

—¡La sabemos pero que muy bien!

—No si Mitchy no comprende —replicó ella tras un instante mientras se volvía hacia este último— que en la naturaleza de las cosas está escrito que lo que a él mismo realmente le hace «tilín» sólo puede ser…

—Ya lo creo. —Mitchy completó la idea de su anfitriona sin dudar—:…una muchacha que sea, como dices tú, inconfundible e incorregiblemente moderna y en quien haya sido desbaratado (oh, naturalmente de un modo tácito, pero no por ello menos efectivo) el piadoso fraude de la tópica semejanza a una hoja de papel en blanco. Ya me has inculcado eso muchas veces. Lo comprendo pero que muy bien. Si yo me resolviese a casarme con Aggie sería exclusivamente por complacer. Una joven moderna, producto de nuestras crudas realidades londinenses y de la inevitable conciencia que ella tenga de éstas tal como son: semejante criatura maravillosa *es*, lo reconozco sin ambages, mi ideal absoluto, y no me avergüenza decir que cuando me gusta un individuo concreto no le tengo miedo a su tipología general. Nanda sabe

demasiadas cosas, no digo que no; pero a fin de cuentas no sabe ni la millonésima parte de lo que sé *yo*.

—¡No estoy muy segura! —exclamó con seriedad la señora Brook.

Él se había hecho oír claramente y prosiguió con una diafanidad desacostumbrada:

—Y, producto por producto, si a eso vamos, yo mismo soy un producto más peliagudo que ningún otro. ¡Hay que ver la de tradiciones que *yo* hago fosfatina! —exclamó riendo Mitchy.

La señora Brook se había incorporado y otra vez Vanderbank se había dirigido hasta la ventana.

—He ahí exactamente por qué —repuso ella— tú y ella sois un par de monstruos y vuestra monstruosidad armonizaría y saldría reforzada. Es incontestable que Nanda sabe demasiadas cosas —agregó.

—Claramente —dijo Mitchy, con determinación— la culpa es toda mía.

—No *toda*… a menos que —replicó la señora Brook— ése sea tan sólo un modo suave de decir que es principalmente mía.

—Oh, también tuya… inmensamente; de hecho, es culpa de lodos. Incluso de Edward, me atrevería a decir; y ciertamente, inequívocamente, de Harold. Ah, y del propio Van… ¡sin duda! —continuó Mitchy—; por mucho que vuelva la espalda y se abstenga de decir nada.

En la espalda que Vanderbank les volvía fue en lo que ahora se posó la mirada de la señora Brook:

—Precisamente por eso Van no debería tener miedo de Nanda.

Él se dio la vuelta inmediatamente:

—Oh, yo no niego mi parte de culpa.

Él resplandeció ante ellos con bastante brillo y la señora Brook, meditabunda, melancólica, abierta, recibió ese esplendor durante algunos momentos.

—¡Y pensar, sin embargo, que a fin de cuentas todo ha sido a través de mera *charla*! —exclamó ella.

De nuevo algo en su tono hizo que prorrumpieran en carcajadas sus oyentes; de tal manera que todavía con apariencia de buen humor fue como comentó Vanderbank:

—Mera, mera, mera. Pero tal vez haya sido precisamente ese «mera» lo que nos ha hecho recorrer tan amplia gama temática.

La perspicacia de la señora Brook ahondó:

—¿Insinúas que no disfrutamos de la eximente de pasión?

Una vez más sus compañeros dieron vía libre al jolgorio, pero luego de un momento Vanderbank dijo menos campechanamente:

—¡Así están las cosas! —Dicho esto, asimismo ofreció la mano.

—*Tienes* miedo —replicó ella mientras se la estrechaba; tras lo cual, como él no reaccionara, lo retuvo ante sí—: ¿Quieres decir que *realmente* no sabes si ella lo recibirá?

—¿El dinero, si Van *no* acepta el pacto? —espetó Mitchy casi con un aire de responsabilidad interrumpiendo el silencio de Vanderbank—. ¡Ah, pero, como ya hemos dicho, a buen seguro…!

Fueron los ojos de Mitchy los que Vanderbank encaró:

—Sí, yo diría que lo recibirá.

—¡En ese caso quizá, a modo de compensación, incluso recibirá *más*!…

—¿Si yo no acepto el pacto? ¡Ah! —dijo Vanderbank. Y mudó de color.

A estas alturas él ya había salido de la estancia, mas la señora Brook retuvo a Mitchy un instante más:

—Ahora (gracias a esa sugerencia). Van cree tener la posibilidad de demostrar algo. No aceptará el pacto.

XXIII

Ya hacía media hora que se habían marchado sus visitantes, pero ella seguía en el salón cuando Nanda regresó. La muchacha se la encontró, sobre el sofá, en una postura que habría podido significar una indolente distracción pero que, tras un vistazo, nuestra jovencita pareció interpretar como pura intensidad cogitativa. Se trataba de un estado del cual, en todo caso, la señora Brook fue rápidamente despabilada por la presencia de su hija: abrió los ojos y puso los pies sobre el suelo, de tal guisa que quedaron tan estrechamente encaradas como pueden llegar a estarlo dos personas cuando sólo es una de ellas quien mira a la otra. Nanda, contemplando vagamente su derredor y sin buscar asiento, lentamente se quitó los guantes mientras la triste mirada de su madre la examinaba de pies a cabeza.

—Ya pasó la hora del té —dijo entonces la señora Brook como si fuese una pérdida especialmente irreparable—. Pero me imagino —agregó— que el señor Longdon te invitaría a todo el té que te diera la gana.

—Oh cielos, sí, gracias; he tomado cantidad.

Nanda se cernía allí esbelta y encantadora, adornada de plumas y de cintas, vestida con finos tejidos frescos y colores difusos, con algo en su efecto de lo cual pareció dar feliz testimonio la dulcificada y espiritualizada melancolía de la mirada de su madre.

—Date la vuelta, querida. —La muchacha obedeció prontamente, y otra vez la señora Brook la inspeccionó entera—. De espaldas quedas mejor… sólo que la doncella no hizo lo que le dije. ¡Hay que ver cómo nos engañan! —exclamó con suave voz entrecortada.

—Sí, pero hay que ver cómo nosotras las engañamos *a ellas*. —Nanda había vuelto a girarse, obviamente infundiendo a su madre, gracias al admirable «porte» de sus ligeras prendas, una paz más honda—. ¿Te refieres al pliegue del medio?; yo ya saína que la doncella no te haría caso. No quiero que de espaldas sea como quedo mejor; yo no camino de espaldas.

—Ya —musitó resignadamente la señora Brook—; te vistes pensando en ti sola.

—Huy, ¿cómo puedes decir eso —preguntó la muchacha— si jamás hinco un solo alfiler sin pensar *en ti*?

—Bueno —moralizó la señora Brook—, siempre se debe, creo, pensar, como una especie de *point de repère*, en alguna que otra persona adecuada. Sólo que es mejor si se trata de una persona a quien se teme. Te las apañas muy bien, pero yo no soy bastante. Lo que realmente hace falta es una especie de saludable terror. *Yo* jamás hinco un solo alfiler sin pensar en tu prima Jane. ¿Qué es aquello que en alguna parte alguien cita sobre que alguien había dicho que «Nuestro antagonista es nuestro colaborador: nos impide ser descuidados»? ¡El extremo hasta el cual, con mi miserable vestuario, la duquesa me impide *a mí*…! —Era éste un grado que la señora Brook sólo supo expresar mediante el abarcador gemido sordo de su sumisión a la fatalidad.

—Sí, la duquesa no es una mujer, ¿verdad? La duquesa es una pauta.

Para la compañera de Nanda, empero, la frase no tuvo un efecto chistoso o irónico, y un marchamo de la especial interrelación de estas buenas amigas era que aun cuando manifestaban la una para con la otra, en tono y modales, tamaña dosis de respeto que casi habría podido imprimirle el sello de la diplomacia, en ello sin embargo había también algo de esa economía de expresión que resulta de experiencias compartidas. A un espectador la abundancia de oportunidades de observarlas juntas le habría enseñado que —por parte de la señora Brook, sin duda alguna, más particularmente— su interrelación era gobernada por dos o tres leyes notablemente consolidadas y, como habría podido decirse, refinadas, cuyo espíritu era tomar precauciones contra la vulgaridad que tantas veces asoma entre progenitor y vástago. Que ellas *eran* tan buenas amigas como si Nanda no hubiese sido su hija, era una verdad que ningún episodio entre ellas podía dejar de ilustrar de un modo u otro. Nanda había cosechado, a ese respecto, desde muy temprano, una flor de la sabiduría materna: «La gente habla mucho sobre la conciencia, pero a mí me parece que es menester

desarrollarla sólo hasta cierto punto y luego dejarla en paz. Una puede olvidarse de su conciencia si una se porta agradablemente con la doncella segunda». La señora Brook se portaba con Nanda tan «agradablemente» como con Sarah Curd… lo cual implicaba, como fácilmente puede imaginarse, las más felices condiciones para Sarah.

—Bueno —reanudó la plática, volviendo sobre la duquesa tras una tasación definitiva de la pinta de la muchacha—, de veras creo que me dejas en buen lugar y que hoy Jane no tendría nada que objetar. Te pareces enormemente a mamá —dejó caer después como si fuese la primera vez que aludía a ello.

—Oh, a la prima Jane eso le da igual —repuso Nanda—. A quien no me parezco es a Aggie, por mucho que lo intente.

—Ah, no deberías intentarlo: no tienes nada que hacer en ese sentido. Uno debe ser lo que uno es.

La señora Brook se había mostrado casi sentenciosa, pero Nanda, con cortesía, hizo caso omiso:

—En todo Londres nadie le llega a la altura del zapato. Es realmente única. Cualquiera que la ve se da cuenta de que es la belleza genuina.

Sin aspereza, la señora Brook se extrañó:

—¿Qué entiendes por la belleza genuina?

Incluso Nanda, empero, hubo de meditar unos instantes:

—Pues la jovencita modelo. Eso es lo que la llama Lord Petherton —bromeó ligeramente—: «la gachí perfecta».

La reacción de su madre no fue suscitada por la broma, sino por algo distinto:

—Ya sé a qué te refieres. ¿Para qué sirve ser virtuosa?

—Oh, no me refería a eso —dijo Nanda—. Aparte, ¿acaso Aggie no es de lo más virtuosa…?

—No hablaba de ella. Me preguntaba a mí misma para qué sirve que *yo* lo sea.

—Vaya, tú no puedes evitar serlo más de lo que la duquesa puede evitar ser…

—¡Ah, pero ella sí podría si quisiera! —exclamó la señora Brook con un tono más brusco que nunca—. No podemos evitar ser virtuosos quizá, si se nos ha impuesto esa carga… pero en otras direcciones hay distancias que no estamos absolutamente obligados a recorrer. Y lo que pienso cuando hinco los alfileres —continuó— es que me da la impresión de que en verdad Jane inmás ha tenido que pagar. —Por unos instantes pareció rumiar esto hasta que no pudo soportarlo más; tras lo cual espetó agriamente—: ¡Córcholis, ella nunca ha tenido que pagar por *nada*!

A estas alturas Nanda ya había tomado asiento, ocupando su lugar, bajo el interés de la charla, en el sofá de su madre, donde, exceptuando haberse despojado de sus largos guantes suaves, que una de sus manos hacía pasar acariciantemente una y otra vez a través de la otra, permanecía sentada de modo muy análogo a como si fuese alguna complaciente aunque circunspecta joven convidada a quien alguna vez la señora Brook hubiese manifestado: «*Ven* a visitarme». Pero había algo quizá más expresamente conciliador en la forma en que no se había despojado de ninguna otra prenda: como si, con una peculiar serenidad y a fin de corroborar delicadamente la idea de la señora Brook del buen lugar en que la había dejado, ni se hubiera quitado su gran sombrero de plumas ni hubiese depositado su sombrilla de seda verde claro, la cual «hacía juego» con el sombrero y las cintas y ostentaba un bonito mango costoso. En su rostro quizá nuestro espectador habría hallado excesiva seriedad como para estar seguro de que hubiese asimismo candor.

—Y ¿quieres decir que *tú* has tenido que pagar…?

—Oh sí, desde que nací. —Al decir esto la señora Brook exhibió un poco de genio vivo, al igual que cuando agregó como para desterrar una vaga intranquilidad—: Pero tú no permitas que eso te desanime.

Nanda pareció sopesar el consejo un instante, y todo esto habría resultado notable a guisa de una nueva pincelada en el cuadro de la extraña sensación, por parte de cada una de ellas, de ausencia de cualquier ligereza en la otra. Nunca sería la escapatoria humorística la que madre e hija buscasen estando juntas: circunstancia ésta, empero, que no en todos los casos habría dejado de volver graciosas sus entrevistas al modo de ver de una tercera persona. A decir verdad, para tal persona ello siempre habría originado una impresión de tensión por debajo de la superficie.

—Yo habría podido apañármelas mucho mejor desde el principio y habría perdido menos tiempo —dijo por fin la muchacha— si no hubiese tenido la desventaja de no acordarme bien de la abuela.

—¡Oh, caramba, *yo* me acuerdo muy bien! —gimió la señora Brook con un acento que fue obvio que al momento siguiente le pareció tan fuera de lugar que hubo de cambiar de tercio levemente. Asió la sombrilla de Nanda como si —siendo una mucho más delicada pertenencia que cualquier otra— sencillamente la complaciese asirla—: Su indumentaria (por lo menos a tu edad) debía de ser estrafalaria. ¿Es en el sitio a que el señor Longdon te ha llevado donde has tomado el té? —continuó entonces.

—Sí, en el museo. Nos dimos un ágape en la cantina. Y más tarde me acompañó a casa de Tishy, donde

nos dimos otro.

—¿Él *entró* contigo? —De pronto la señora Brook había relampagueado de interés.

—Huy, sí: yo lo hice entrar.

—¿Él no quería?

—Todo lo contrario: tenía muchas ganas. Pero él no hace todo lo que desea —dijo Nanda.

La señora Brook pareció maravillarse:

—¿Quieres decir que también has de desearlo tú?

—Oh no, *eso* no es suficiente. Lo que supongo que quiero decir —siguió Nanda— es que él no hace nada que no desee. Pero hace bastantes cosas —agregó.

—Y ¿quién estaba en ese momento en casa de Tishy?

—Oh, la pobre Tish, naturalmente, y Carrie Donner.

—¿Y nadie más?

La muchacha hizo una pausa.

—Sí, se presentó el señor Cashmore —respondió.

Su madre dejó escapar un gruñido de irritación:

—Ah, ¿*otra* vez?

Nanda reflexionó un instante:

—¿Qué es eso de «otra vez»? Simplemente el señor Cashmore se pasa por allí con la misma frecuencia que desde siempre, y Tishy no puede impedírselo.

—Me refería a la circunstancia de que el señor Longdon se encontrara *con él*. Cuando hace algún tiempo lo conoció aquí le agradó poquísimo. ¿Le ha agradado hoy un poco más? —preguntó la señora Brook con voz trémula.

—Huy, no: lo odió.

—Pero ¿es que el señor Longdon no sabía que, si entraba, *iba* a encontrárselo?

—Sí, a punto fijo… pero deseaba ver.

—Ver ¿el qué? —exigió la señora Brook.

—Caramba, pues la casa que visito tan asiduamente. Y sabía que yo lo deseaba.

—No entiendo muy bien por qué —observó pacíficamente la señora Brook. Y, como su hija no dijera nada para iluminarla, inquirió—: En cualquier caso, ¿aborreció ese hogar?

A guisa de respuesta, pasado un instante Nanda se limitó a plantear una pregunta:

—Vaya, ¿cómo habría podido él comprenderlo?

—¿Te refieres, como yo, al hecho de que visites esa casa tan asiduamente? Cierto: ¿cómo habría podido?

—No me refiero a eso —replicó la muchacha—, pues eso lo comprende perfectamente, porque a todos los vio… ¿cómo describirlo?… aferrarme y apegárseme de una forma extraordinaria.

Con plena gravedad la señora Brook examinó aquel cuadro; después preguntó:

—Y ¿estuvo el señor Cashmore, hoy, igual de ridículo?

—Huy, él no es ridículo, mamá: es muy desdichado. Ahora cree que probablemente Lady Fanny no se fugará, pero le parece que eso sólo puede ser, después de todo, peor para él mismo.

—*Sí* se fugará —replicó la señora Brook, con una de sus rocambolescas aproximaciones a la firmeza—. *Es* un grandísimo idiota. Ella estuvo aquí hace una hora, ¡y si alguna vez una mujer ha hecho las maletas…!

—Pero —objetó Nanda— ¿acaso ella no se pasa la vida haciendo y deshaciendo las maletas?

Empero, esta interrogante refrenó escasamente a su madre:

—No… aunque hasta ahora *ha* malgastado, no hay duda, un gran número de fatigas. Ahora mismo tiene preparados una docena de baúles (los vi claramente en su maravillosa mirada) aguardando solamente que pasen a recogerlos. ¡De modo que si cuentas con que no se fugará, querida…! —Con la cabeza la señora Brook ejecutó un movimiento que fue la advertencia de la sabiduría.

—¡Oh, a mí me da igual lo que haga! —repuso Nanda—. A lo que hace un momento me refería es a que el señor Longdon no podía comprender por qué, con tantas posibilidades para ello, ellos no eran capaces de ser felices decentemente.

—Y ¿deseó que se lo explicaras tú?

—Traté de hacerlo, pero mejoré muy poco las cosas. Ellos no le agradan. Ni siquiera le cae bien Tish.

—¿Eso te dijo él… de sopetón?

—Oh —dijo Nanda—, por supuesto yo fui quien se lo preguntó. ¡No lo interrogué más a fondo, pues eso es algo que nunca hago…!

—¿Nunca lo haces? —atajó la señora Brook como con el atisbo de una nueva luz.

La muchacha hizo gala de una indulgencia hacia esta curiosidad que por un momento resultó casi

madura:

—Estando con él, me lo paso bomba esperando tranquilamente su próxima ocurrencia.

Evidentemente su tono y su semblante exhibieron algo novedosamente, incluso casi supremamente sugestivo para su compañera en esta coyuntura; y no obstante la consecuencia de los mismos por parte de la señora Brook fue únicamente una pregunta tan despreocupada que muy bien podía haber sido ya planteada numerosas veces. La mirada de la madre, para plantearla, podemos añadirlo sin embargo, se clavó fijamente en la de la hija, y su propio semblante casi se puso candente:

—¿Tan profundamente lo aprecias?

Fue como si al instante inmediato Nanda se sintiera en guardia. Empero habló con cierta entrega:

—¡Bueno, lo cierto es que es embriagador que a una…! —Pero titubeó tratando de encontrar las palabras exactas.

—…¿la halague tan estupendamente, quieres decir…, incluso un viejecito tiquismiquis? ¿*Verdad*, querida —continuó la señora Brook alentadoramente—, que el señor Longdon te halaga estupendamente?

Ante esto desde luego un espectador supositivo habría imaginado en el semblante de la muchacha el delicado alborear de una sensación de que de pronto su madre se había puesto vulgar, junto con una conciencia global de que siempre el mejor modo de enfrentarse a la vulgaridad era ser franca y abierta:

—Él hace que una disfrute sintiéndose tan apreciada… más apreciada, lo creo de veras, de lo que lo he sido jamás por ninguna otra persona.

Aunque la señora Brook vaciló, estuvo claro que ello no fue, empero, por haberse arrepentido:

—¡Seguro que no más que por el querido Mitchy! O incluso, si a eso vamos, por la propia Tishy.

Persistió la llaneza de Nanda:

—Oh, el señor Longdon es distinto de Tishy.

De nuevo su madre vaciló:

—Naturalmente querrás decir que él sabe más.

La muchacha lo consideró:

—Él no sabe *más*. Pero sabe otras cosas… y es más majo que Mitchy.

—¿Lo dices porque él no desea desposarte?

Nanda prosiguió como si no hubiese oído:

—Vaya, el señor Longdon es más querible.

—¡Ajá! —exclamó la señora Brook, con tal desafuero comentarístico que casi equivalió a una refutación de su buen gusto incluso por parte de ella misma.

Ello intensificó la sencillez de Nanda:

—Es una de las personas más queribles del mundo.

Ante esto su compañera, tras una rápida cavilación, le clavó la mirada:

—¿Es que el señor Longdon, querida, *desea* desposarte?

—Sí… con toda clase de personas absurdas.

—Pero yo quiero decir… ¿lo aceptarías *a él*? Incorporándose, Nanda acogió la pregunta con un raudo «¡Sí!» irónico que fue su primera manifestación de impaciencia. Y agregó:

—Es tan maravilloso gozar de aprecio sin gozar de aprobación.

Pero la señora Brook no anheló sino saber más:

—¿El señor Longdon no aprueba…?

—No, pero da lo mismo. Todo va maravillosamente bien, pese a ello.

La señora Brook pareció preguntarse, sin embargo, cómo podía ir todo maravillosamente bien:

—¿No desea que renuncies a nada? —Tuvo la pinta de discurrir velozmente a qué *podía* renunciar Nanda.

—Oh sí, a todo.

Fue como si por un instante le pareciera enigmática su hija; después la señora Brook esbozó una extraña sonrisa:

—¿A mí?

La muchacha fue absolutamente rauda:

—A todo. Pero en el fondo no le gustaría mucho que lo hiciese.

Su madre volvió a guardar silencio.

—¿Es que el señor Longdon desea *adoptarte*? —preguntó. Entonces con mayor celeridad y tristeza, aunque también un poco como desprovista de valor para seguir pidiendo información adicional, declaró—: Nosotros no soportaríamos renunciar a ti, Nanda.

—Muchísimas gracias, mamá. Pero no nos veremos sometidos a tan dura prueba —dijo Nanda— porque

adónde todo va a parar parece ser a que en realidad soy yo quien está lo que tú llamarías adoptándolo *a él*. Me refiero a que poco a poco estoy cambiándolo… enseñándole gradualmente que, así como de ninguna manera yo habría podido ser diferente, y así como naturalmente hay un límite para las cosas a que se puede renunciar, la única salida que él tiene es dejar de preocuparse y cargar conmigo tal como soy. Eso, ¿no te das cuenta?, es lo que él nunca habría esperado hacer.

Hasta cierto punto la señora Brook aceptó la explicación, pero no se deshizo enteramente de su propia especulatividad:

—Pero… er… cargar contigo, «tal como eres», ¿*adónde*?

—Pues al museo de South Kensington.

—¡Ah! —dijo la señora Brook. Luego, sin embargo, con un tono más ejemplar, preguntó—: ¿Te lo pasas tan sumamente bien durante tus largos ratos con él?

Por unos instantes Nanda semejó preguntarse cómo expresarlo.

—Vaya, somos grandes amigos —dijo por fin.

—Y ¿siempre habláis sobre la abuela?

—Oh, no: en realidad, actualmente casi nunca.

—¿Ya no la tiene en tan alta consideración? —En esta pregunta hubo una insólita ilusión: una esperanza, una especie de entusiasmo, por algo que podría ser provechoso para Nanda.

La muchacha se limitó a afrontar estas cosas con solícita seriedad:

—Creo que está perdiendo toda conciencia de mis similitudes. Se ha acostumbrado demasiado a ellas, o ahora las tapan demasiadas otras cosas demasiado disímiles.

—Pues bien —dijo la señora Brook mientras asimilaba aquello—, me parece maravillosamente inteligente por tu parte quedarte sólo con lo bueno de él y desentenderte de toda la inquietud.

Nanda se quedó extrañada:

—¿La inquietud?

—Me la dejas toda *a mí* —insistió su madre, mas con cabal indulgencia—. De cualquier forma espero que lo bueno, para ti, será palpable.

—¿Palpable? —tomó a hacer de eco la muchacha, permaneciendo desorientada.

Ante esto la señora Brook exhibió, aunque no irritación, sí una llamarada de severidad:

—Has de recordar que tenemos un buen montón de cosas en que pensar. Hay cosas que debemos dar por supuestas unos en otros: todos debemos ayudar, a nuestro modo, a empujar la carroza. Eso es lo que entiendo por la inquietud, y si tú no experimentas ninguna, tanto mejor para ti. Pues yo la experimento a todas horas del día. Por estas fechas tu padre y yo siempre tenemos una increíble cantidad de cosas en que pensar, como sabes perfectamente: hemos de hacer malabarismos para arreglárnoslas de un modo u otro para irnos de vacaciones, hemos de escatimar y economizar, para cubrir todas nuestras necesidades, con dinero, dinero, dinero, que todo el rato se nos escurre entre los dedos como si fuese agua. Este verano los niños no parecen hallar acomodo en ninguna actividad, en ningún sitio; y Harold está más odioso que nunca: no sabe hacer nada solo y exige que los demás se lo hagan todo. Él habla de su novia norteamericana, forrada de millones, que está chaladita por él, pero yo no he visto ni rastro de ella; la única, en este momento, de quien la gente parece haber oído hablar es la que está prometida con Booby Manger. Literalmente los Manger lo acaparan todo —continuó ahora la señora Brook gemebundamente—: ese judío tan mastodónticamente rico (¿cómo se llama?… el barón Schack o Schmack) que acaba de alquilar Cumberland House y que tartamudea lamentablemente (¿qué le pasaba?… carece del paladar) va a pagarle cuatrocientas al año, por servirle de portavoz en las conversaciones, al tarambana del pequeño Algie; es un empleo que Harold me había asegurado que, de toda la avalancha de jóvenes solicitantes (¡docenas!), *él* era quien tenía más posibilidades de conseguirlo. El mal humor permanente de tu padre es terrible, y soy yo quien tiene que soportar sus peores accesos; este año no vamos a cobrar literalmente nada por la Casucha, y sin embargo vamos a tener que gastamos en ella Dios sabe cuánto; y todo el mundo nos ha invitado, durante los próximos tres meses, a Escocia y a todas partes, para una fecha inoportuna y nadie para una oportuna; así es que te aseguro que no sé en qué refugiarme… lo cual no impide que, encima, todo el mundo me venga con sus propios problemas egoístas. —Era como si la señora Brook hubiera visto el cáliz de sus ocultos pesares súbitamente zarandeado por un empujón cuya perversidad, si bien no completamente percibida en un principio, había resultado ser, en cuanto ella se había dejado arrastrar mínimamente por sus emociones, suficiente para hacerlo derramarse; pero ella se hizo, acto seguido, contemplando la calma de su hija, una reflexión sobre la inutilidad de tamaño acaloramiento y velozmente se recobró como a fin de recalcar la lección con mayor dignidad—: Soy capaz de soportar mi carga y lo haré hasta las últimas consecuencias; pero todos hemos de recordar que nos haremos añicos si no nos las apañamos para

conservar una mínima idea de lo que es la responsabilidad. Desde luego yo no puedo organizarme sin saber cuándo vas a visitarlo.

—¿Al señor Longdon? Oh, cuando yo quiera —respondió Nanda con gran respeto e inocencia.

—Y ¿cuándo tendrás la bondad de querer?

—Bueno, él se va allí el sábado, conque si lo deseo puedo ir unos días después.

—Y ¿qué día puedes ir si lo deseo *yo*? —La señora Brook habló como con una pequeña brusquedad (suficientemente suavizada a tiempo) ocasionada por la visión de una libertad por parte de su hija que súbitamente se le perfiló mucho más grandiosa que cualquier libertad que ella misma disfrutara. Ello siguió siendo parte de la inestabilidad del recipiente de sus aflicciones; pero al fin y a la postre ella nunca permanecía demasiado tiempo sujeta públicamente a ese influjo que a menudo designaba abarcadoramente, ante los demás no menos que ante sí misma, como «la grosería»—. Lo que quiero decir es que podrías ir el mismo día, ¿no?

—¿Con él? ¿En el tren? Creo que sí, si ése es tu deseo.

—Pero ¿será ése *su* deseo? Quiero decir, ¿el señor Longdon sentiría aversión hacia ello?

—Creo que ni por asomo, pero fácilmente puedo preguntárselo.

La cabeza de la señora Brook se ladeó hacia la chimenea y sus ojos hacia la ventana:

—¿Fácilmente?

Durante unos momentos Nanda pareció desconcertada por la insistencia de su madre.

—En todo caso puedo intentarlo sin mayor problema —declaró.

—¿Incluso recordando que mamá jamás se habría mostrado tan atosigante?

El rostro de Nanda pareció aceptar incluso ese condicionamiento.

—Bueno —contestó la muchacha serenamente en definitiva—, en verdad yo creo que somos lo bastante buenos amigos para cualquier cosa.

Aquello habría podido ser, dado el interés que rápidamente ocasionó, exactamente lo que su madre había estado afanándose por hacerla decir:

—¿Cómo describirías eso entonces, me gustaría a mí saber, sino como tu adopción por parte de él?

—Oh, no creo que importe mucho cómo se describa.

—¿Con tal que implique, quieres decir —preguntó la señora Brook—, todos los privilegios?

—Bueno, sí —dijo Nanda, que ahora había comenzado a sonreír tenuemente—, llámalos privilegios.

La señora Brook hizo una pausa; luego dijo:

—Servidora estaría muy dispuesta a llamarlos así si supiera de un modo un poco más concreto en qué van a consistir exactamente.

—Ah, el gran privilegio, desde mi punto de vista, es hacer algo *por él*.

Ante esto, la otra vaciló nuevamente:

—Pero ¿acaso eso, querida, no confiere unas características más bien chocantes a la exuberancia de tu entrega a él? La caridad bien entendida, cielo, empieza por una misma, y si es cuestión de meramente *dar*, tienes bastantes destinatarios para tu prodigalidad sin necesidad de marcharte tan lejos.

La muchacha, tal como lo patentizó su mirada de pasmo, quedó paralizada un momento por la sorpresa, la cual enseguida halló expresión verbal:

—¡Caramba, yo creía que deseabas que fuera simpática con él!

—Pues bien, espero que no me consideres excesivamente vulgar —dijo la señora Brook— si te digo que lo que deseo todavía más es que hagas algún cálculo sobre lo que te reportará ello. No quiero —agregó— proseguir dándote la tabarra a propósito de Mitchy…

—¡No, por favor! —suplicó Nanda.

Su madre se calló bruscamente, como si en aquel tono hubiese habido algo que vetaba la cuestión tanto más drásticamente por haber sido espontáneo. No obstante, la pobre señora Brook fue incapaz de dejar así las cosas:

—Pues entonces, ¿qué recibirás a cambio?

—¿A cambio de Mitchy? Oh —dijo Nanda—, nunca me casaré.

Ante esto la señora Brook se apartó de ella, dirigiéndose hasta la ventana con avivado hastío. Por su parte, Nanda, como si la charla hubiese concluido, se llegó hasta el sofá para coger su sombrilla antes de irse de la habitación, deseo más bien fortalecido que debilitado por la aparición de su hermano Harold, quien entró en el momento en que sus dos parientas estaban de espaldas a la puerta y obsequió a su hermana, cuando ésta lo encaró, con un saludo que hizo darse la vuelta a su madre:

—¡Vaya, Nan, *estás* preciosa! ¿A que está preciosa, mamá?

—¡No! —respondió la señora Brook sin, empero, prestarle mayor atención a él. En este instante su

desesperación interior estaba concentrada toda en su hija—: Pues entonces tu padre y yo ya consideraremos si él debe cargar con las consecuencias.

Nanda ya tenía la mano en la puerta mientras que Harold se había dejado caer en el sofá.

—¿«Él»? —se limitó a musitar la muchacha.

—Me refiero al señor Longdon.

—Y ¿a qué te refieres con eso de las consecuencias?

—Pues a que por lo pronto hagas el favor de irte *con* él.

—¿El sábado entonces? Gracias, mamá —contestó Nanda. Al instante ya había salido, con lo cual la señora Brook dispuso de mayor atención que prestarle a su hijo. Esto se exteriorizó inequívocamente, pasado un momento, cuando se aproximó al sofá y alzó la mirada de la mesita contigua:

—¿Dónde diablos está el billete de cinco libras que había aquí?

Con aire ausente Harold miró alrededor:

—¿Qué billete de cinco libras?

LIBRO SÉPTIMO

MITCHY

XXIV

El jardín del señor Longdon abarcaba tres acres y, pleno de rasgos encantadores, tenía como su más grande maravilla la extensión y colorido de su antiguo muro de ladrillo, cuya superficie rosácea y purpúrea era fruto de benéficas eras y cuya función protectora, para un visitante que deambulara, holgara, conversara, leyera, resultaba la de una especie de guardián del ensueño. La atmósfera del lugar, en la época de agosto, vibraba continuamente con el arrobamiento de los pájaros, el zumbido de pequeñas vidas imperceptibles y el revoloteo de mariposas blancas. Sobre el cercado césped vasto y lacio era donde Nanda estaba hablándole a Vanderbank acerca de las tres semanas que a la mañana siguiente ya habría insumido la estancia de ella allí y que habían sido —ella no lo ocultaba— las más felices que jamás había pasado dondequiera. El día agrisado había sido suave y quedo y el cielo había estado tenuemente jaspeado mientras el visitante más recientemente venido de Londres, quien había llegado a última hora de la tarde del viernes, había pasado la mañana ganduleando en una actitud cada una de cuyas relajadas líneas hacía referencia al día festivo que él, por así decirlo —al inicio observando el entorno y degustando una refacción —, se había arrellanado para contemplar cual expedicionario frente a una ciudadela. Había asientos, allí mismo, sobre los que el sol no caía a plomo: bancos almohadillados bajo una expansiva y densa proliferación de ramas de morera. Un voluminoso libro de informes descansaba sobre el regazo del joven, y Nanda había salido de la casa y acudido junto a él, media hora antes del almuerzo, con algo del estilo de Beatriz acudiendo junto a Benedicto[18]; en realidad no había sido para avisarlo de que entrara enseguida a comer, sino mencionando inmediatamente que acudía obedeciendo una intimación ajena. A ella el señor Longdon, al parecer, le había reprochado su desatención hacia el visitante, mostrándole de esta guisa, para placer de ella, cuán lejos había llegado en el sentido de considerarla, como decía él, parte de la casa.

—¿Te habías considerado a ti misma —preguntó Vanderbank— una simple dependienta a sueldo y ahora descubres que eres socia y posees una participación en el negocio?

—Algo así es lo que parece. Pero ¿acaso una socia no aporta algo? ¿Qué he aportado yo?

—Pues… *a mí*, sin ir más lejos. ¿No es el hecho de que estés aquí lo que me ha atraído desde la capital?

—¿Quieres decir que no habrías venido para visitarlo a él solo? ¿O sea que para ti él no posee ningún poder de atracción? No debería ser así —dijo Nanda— con lo mucho que te aprecia.

Anheloso de un río, Vanderbank llevaba puestos pantalones blancos de franela, y acogió su pregunta con una alegre carcajada, un apuesto semblante de buen humor, que complementó el efecto de su larga blancura fresca:

—¿Te importa que me quede sentado en silencio y fumando mientras permaneces junto a mí un ratito? Poco después podemos dar un paseo, si quieres. Pero frente a esta preciosa mansión antigua, en esta acogedora y apacible localidad, uno siente demasiado bienestar para hacer nada, no sea que siquiera levantar un dedo rompa el hechizo. Lo que *sería* perfecto es que te sentaras (*haz* el favor de sentarte) a regañarme un poco. Eso, mi querida Nanda, haría resaltar la paz. —Algunos minutos más tarde, mientras ella, cerca de él pero en una silla separada, manoseaba el imposible libro, como lo calificó ella, que le había cogido al joven, éste volvió sobre lo último que ella había dicho—: ¿Él te ha hablado largo y tendido sobre lo mucho que me «aprecia»?

Nanda guardó silencio un instante, hojeando el libro; luego respondió:

—No.

—Entonces, ¿cómo es que hace un instante te has mostrado tan segura de ello?

—Yo no sólo estoy segura cuando me hablan de algo largo y tendido. Yo no sé únicamente —insistió— lo que las personas me cuentan.

—Oh, claro: ¡eres demasiado hija de tu madre para limitarte a eso! —Vanderbank se recostó y fumó y, pese a que todo su continente parecía decir que cuando uno se siente tan plácidamente predispuesto a

cotillear sirve casi cualquier tema, mantenía el mismo nervioso meneíllo del pie que durante aquella media hora en Mertle que esta crónica ya ha recogido—. Eres demasiado miembro de nuestro círculo —prosiguió —. Nosotros los del grupo tenemos un discernimiento portentoso —declaró riendo—. Por supuesto que yo *habría* venido para visitarlo a él solo. Mas pensándolo bien —agregó como si cualquier trivialidad encajara en la presente coyuntura— tal vez él, de no ser por ti, ya sabes, nunca me habría invitado.

Nanda sólo aceptó aquel parecer a fin de replicar:

—Eso es una tergiversación lamentable. Él es tan humilde que habría temido que te aburrieras estando solo con él.

—Eso es precisamente lo que quiero decir.

—Pues si eso quieres decir —repuso Nanda—, la explicación es un poco presuntuosa.

—Oh, tan sólo la he ofrecido —dijo Vanderbank— para hacer alusión a su humildad. —Más allá del césped la mansión se alzaba ante él, antigua, cuadrada, de tejado rojizo, bien segura de su derecho al lugar que ocupaba sobre la tierra. Éste comprendía una considerable extensión (por lo menos en el pequeño mundo de Beccles) y el aire de posesión rezumaba de ella por doquier, bajo la forma de antiguas ventanas y puertas, la tonalidad de antiguas superficies rojizas, el estilo de antiguos paramentos blancos, la edad de antiguas enredaderas trepadoras, la prolongada consagración por el tiempo. Evocador de aposentos artesonados, de valiosa caoba, de retratos de mujeres pretéritas, de porcelana colorida brillando débilmente en el interior de vitrinas y delicada plata reflejada en la superficie de mesas desnudas, el edificio era uno de esos símbolos históricos cuya producción insume un par de siglos—. ¡Fíjate —exclamó el joven sin venir a cuento—, al señor Longdon le da por abandonar algo tan entrañable como todo esto para irse a la capital a vivir *con nosotros*!

Durante unos instantes, también la muchacha se abismó en contemplación.

—Ah, tú no tienes ni idea de lo absolutamente maravilloso que es todo esto —contestó—; el encanto brota conforme se vive aquí. Crece y crece cada vez más. Por doquier hay objetos antiguos sumamente fascinantes. Él me permite explorar a fondo, me permite revolver y registrar; y todos los días hago algún nuevo descubrimiento.

Mientras fumaba, Vanderbank se maravilló:

—¿Quieres decir que te permite coger los objetos…?

—Huy, sí… y llevármelos a mi habitación, para examinarlos o dibujarlos. Hay antiguos patrones de costura que son preciosos para cualquier labor. Sólo cuando convives con estas cosas, ¿sabes?, es cuando logras hacerte una idea. Todo en este lugar es tan buena compañía.

—Tu madre debería venir —sugirió Vanderbank a renglón seguido—. Le gustan tanto las buenas compañías. —Luego, como Nanda no respondiera nada, siguió—: ¿Estuvo aquí tu abuela alguna vez?

—Jamás —dijo la muchacha raudamente—. Jamás —repitió en un tono bastante distinto. Tras lo cual agregó—: Yo soy la única.

—Oh, y yo. «Tú y yo», como suele decirse —enmendó su compañero.

—Sí, y el señor Mitchy, que va a presentarse aquí (te ruego que no lo olvides) esta tarde.

Vanderbank hizo una de sus pausas contemplativas; luego comentó:

—Gracias por recordármelo. Pondré mi alma al descubierto lo más posible antes de que él venga: intentaré producir una impresión tan honda que quedaré a resguardo. Pero ¿por qué lo ha invitado el señor Longdon?

—Ah —dijo Nanda alegremente—, ¿por qué te ha invitado *a ti*?

—Caramba, por la razón que mencionaste hace un momento: porque su interés en mí es tan irreprimible.

—Pero ¿acaso su interés en Mitchy no es…?

—…¿de la misma índole global? —atajó Vanderbank—. De eso nada. —Pareció buscar una fórmula para expresar aquella diferenciación, y de repente se le ocurrió—: No estuvo enamorado de la madre de Mitchy.

—En efecto. —Nanda le dio vueltas a aquello—: La madre de Mitchy, al parecer, fue inaguantable. El señor Cashmore la conoció.

Eran profusas las bocanadas de humo de Vanderbank y frecuentes sus pausas.

—¿Inaguantable con el señor Cashmore? Me alegro de oírlo: el señor Cashmore debió de merecérselo. Pero de todas formas me inclino a pensar bien de ella. Muchas veces el propio Mitchy es inaguantable —siguió divagando el joven—. E igualmente pienso bien *de él*.

—También yo —dijo Nanda—, y por eso lo he invitado.

—¿*Tú* lo has invitado, mi querida señorita? ¿Eres quien ejerce la administración de la hospitalidad aquí?

—Oh, sí.

En verdad la mirada que él le lanzó semejó preguntar si ella hablaba en broma o en serio.

—¿Conque fuiste tú quien hizo que también fuese invitado yo?

Ella tomó a pasar algunas hojas del libro y, cerrándolo casi con un estampido, lo depositó al lado de él sobre el banco, acción durante la cual él, como si se hubiese sumido en cavilaciones, no le prestó ninguna ayuda.

—Lo que quiero decir es que yo se lo propuse al señor Longdon, yo le sugerí que lo invitara. Tengo una razón para querer verlo; deseo hablar con él. Y ¿sabes —prosiguió la muchacha— qué dijo el señor Longdon?

—Algo espléndido, como es natural.

—Preguntó si a lo mejor no te desagradaría que él estuviera aquí contigo.

Echando hacia atrás la cabeza, Vanderbank se rió, fumó, meneó el pie más que nunca:

—Cuán considerado. ¡El querido y viejo Mitch! ¡Qué poco miedo le tienes!

Nanda se extrañó:

—¿A Mitch?

—Sí: al extraordinario poderío que de veras posee. No hay más que hablar: lo *posee*. Pero claro está que no quiero decir que yo no sea consciente. —Y como si fuese consecuencia de su nerviosa cordialidad él cambió de posición—. Me doy perfecta cuenta de que *no* tienes miedo. Me doy perfecta cuenta de lo que te propones. Ni en sueños se me ocurriría imputarte (en lo que respecta a *él*) la más mínima propensión a coquetear; de hecho, no más —continuó Vanderbank plácidamente— que la más mínima tendencia general en ese sentido. No, mi querida Nanda —insistió amablemente en su alegato—, en tu favor *sí* diré que, aunque muchacha, gracias al cielo, e incluso tan *rematadamente* muchacha, en términos generales verdaderamente no eres más coqueta de lo que dicta un respetable ideal social.

—Mil millones de gracias —repuso su compañera modestamente.

En el tono de esto hubo algo que lo hizo lanzar una carcajada, y este concreto sonido armonizó con todo lo demás: con el día de agosto y el encantador paraje y la figura apoltronada del joven y la implícita hospitalidad discreta de la propia Nanda.

—Naturalmente te da la impresión de que con involuntaria sublimidad me muestro paternalista contigo. Bueno, todo va bien, pues en estas condiciones ¿qué es lo más natural sino lo más exuberante? ¿Acaso Mitchy no se volverá fabuloso al sentirlas y gozarlas? Te aseguro que estoy encantado de que venga. —Entonces, pasado un momento, él preguntó en un tono diferente—: ¿Piensas quedarte aquí una larga temporada?

Nanda tardó cierto rato en decir:

—Todo el tiempo que el señor Longdon esté dispuesto a mantenerme, supongo… si es que eso no suena demasiado feo.

—¡Huy, ya lo creo que te mantendrá! Sólo que ¿no querrá él mismo —ahondó Vanderbank— trasladarse a la capital en el transcurso del otoño?

—Vaya, en ese caso estaría perfectamente dispuesta a quedarme aquí sin él.

—¿Y a dejarlo en Londres *sin ti*? Ah, no es eso lo que queremos los del grupo: él no sería lo mismo sin ti. ¡Y nada sería lo mismo para él! —declaró Vanderbank.

Otra vez Nanda reflexionó:

—Sí, eso es lo que al señor Longdon lo vuelve gracioso, supongo: su curioso encaprichamiento. Yo lo pongo en movimiento… ¿cómo denomináis eso?… yo lo hago resaltar… haciendo que él dé vueltas y más vueltas a mi alrededor lo mismo que el acróbata a caballo en el circo da vueltas alrededor del payaso. Él me ha hablado largo y tendido sobre tu madre —añadió digresivamente.

—Y siempre de un modo elogioso, por supuesto, o de lo contrario no se te ocurriría mencionarlo.

—En efecto —dijo Nanda.

—Entiendo, entiendo; cuán amable por su parte. —Vanderbank mantenía inclinada hacia atrás su elevada cabeza como por mor de la contemplación (con un claro, igualitario, generoso interés) de lo que ambos veían ante sí, fuese con los ojos o con la imaginación—. ¿De quién crees que recibí carta ayer? Una divertidísima misiva de Harold. Me comunicaba todas las noticias de vuestra familia.

—Y ¿*cuáles* son las noticias de mi familia? —inquirió tras un instante la muchacha.

—Pues la primera gran noticia es que Harold mismo…

—…¿quería —atajó Nanda— pedirte prestadas cinco libras? Lo digo —añadió— porque si te ha escrito…

—…¿es imposible que haya sido por el simple gusto de una relación epistolar? —Vanderbank vaciló, pero siguió sin mirarla—. ¿Qué es lo que sabes tú, si me haces el favor, sobre las peticiones de préstamos

del pobre Harold?

—Oh, sé sobre eso lo mismo que sobre otras cosas. ¿Acaso yo no lo sé todo?

—¿*Es* cierto eso? Me veo en el deber de preguntártelo —repuso el joven bastante alegremente.

—¿Por qué no iba a saberlo todo? ¿Cómo no iba a saberlo todo? Tú sabes lo que yo sé. —Después, como para explicarse y atenuar un poco el imprevisto énfasis con que había hablado, dijo—: Recuerdo que una vez me dijiste que debía asimilar las cosas por todos mis poros.

Su compañero se quedó mirando pasmado, pero la subsiguiente risa volvió a hacerlo cambiar de postura:

—¿Que «*debías*»…?

—Que de hecho lo hago… y tenías toda la razón.

—Y ¿cuándo formulé esa extraordinaria acusación?

—Ah —dijo Nanda—, conque admites que *es* una acusación. Fue hace mucho tiempo… cuando era una niña. ¡Lo cual lo hizo aún peor! —se le escapó.

De cualquier modo esto no logró sino hacerlo más divertido para Vanderbank ahora:

—¡Oh, no peor, sino mejor!

Ella reflexionó un instante:

—¿Porque en ese caso yo habría podido no entenderlo? Pero lo que siempre has querido decir es precisamente que sí entiendo.

—¿«Siempre», mi querida Nanda? ¡Por alguna razón me siento —dijo muy gentilmente— como si me abrumaras!

—«Te sientes» como si te abrumara… pero lo cierto es justamente que no te abrumo. ¡El día en que te abrume, señor Van…! —Ella abandonó este punto, no obstante; había demasiado que decir sobre ello y había algo distinto que decir, mucho más sencillo—: Actualmente las muchachas entienden. Hay que afrontar el hecho, como dice Tishy.

—Caray —dijo Vanderbank riéndose—, nosotros no necesitamos que Tishy nos haga notar eso. ¿Qué estamos haciendo todos la mayor parte del tiempo sino tratar de afrontarlo?

—¿Haciendo? ¿No estáis haciendo más bien algo muy distinto? Tratáis de eludirlo. Tratáis de hacer creer (quizá no tanto para convenceros a vosotros mismos cuanto a *nosotras*) que no es un hecho real.

—¡Pero a buen seguro vosotras no querréis que nosotros hagamos cosas mucho peores!

Con enérgica gravedad ella realizó un ademán negativo:

—A nosotras en realidad no nos importa lo que hagáis vosotros.

Ahora el regocijo masculino cayó sobre ella más abiertamente:

—Tu «nosotras» es una verdadera delicia. Es encantador oírte hablar en nombre de toda la adorable corporación. Sólo que hablas, ¿sabes?, como si fueseis precisamente esa casta descastada que te quejas de que nosotros (mediante nuestros prejuicios) insinuamos que sois.

Ella consideró aquella objeción mirándolo a la cara:

—Pues entonces sí nos importa. ¡Sólo que…!

—Sólo que es un problema muy complejo.

—Oh sí, no cabe duda: es un problema muy complejo. —Ella semejó desear convenir con él respecto de cualquier cosa razonable—. Hasta el señor Longdon lo reconoce.

Vanderbank se maravilló:

—¿Quieres decir que discutes con él sobre…?

—…¿la cuestión de la formación de las muchachas? Caramba, apenas discutimos sobre otra cosa.

—Ah, así no es de extrañar que no te aburras. Pero ¿quieres decir —preguntó Vanderbank— que él admite la inevitable transformación…?

—No puede cerrar los ojos ante la realidad. Ve que actualmente nosotras somos algo muy distinto.

—Ya. —Su amigo apreció aquello en toda su medida—. Y sin embargo lo que pasaba antiguamente… ¿qué sabes *tú* sobre eso?

—¿Yo personalmente? Bueno, he presenciado algunas transformaciones incluso en *mi* corta existencia. Y ¿acaso los libros antiguos no están colmados de nosotras? Por último, el propio señor Longdon me ha contado cosas.

Vanderbank fumó y volvió a fumar.

—¿Has profundizado mucho en ello en compañía de él? —inquirió.

—Tanto como puedan hacerlo juntos un hombre y una mujer.

Mientras él asimilaba esto apartando la mirada, habría podido resonarle en los oídos el eco de todas las veces que en Buckingham Crescent había sido comentado que Nanda era «asombrosa». Lo *era*

indiscutiblemente.

—Oh, pero claro está que en ciertos aspectos él es pudoroso —apuntó él.

—Rematadamente… y admirablemente. Y además está Aggie —prosiguió la muchacha—. Quiero decir como vera imagen de lo antiguo.

—Sí, no hay duda… presuponiendo que *sea* la vera imagen de lo antiguo. Pero ¿qué diantre *es* Aggie en realidad?

—Pues —dijo Nanda con el más vivo interés— Aggie es un milagro. Si una pudiera ser ella exactamente, absolutamente, sin la más mínima disimilitud, probablemente lo mejor que una podría hacer sería plegarse a ello. De lo contrario (en cualquier caso *excepto* ése), prefiero conservar mi propia personalidad consolidándola como el hierro descaradamente.

Ante esto, entre ellos se produjo un silencio de unos minutos, tras el cual probablemente ninguno de los dos habría sabido decir si sus miradas se habían encontrado durante su transcurso. De todos modos tal no fue el caso mientras Vanderbank exclamaba finalmente:

—¡Tu hierro, mi querida señorita, es oro puro!

—Entonces es a mí, me da la impresión, a quien Harold debería pedir prestado.

—Con eso, ¿quieres decir que el mío no lo es? —inquirió Vanderbank.

—Vaya, en realidad tú no tienes ningún «descaro» natural… no como *algunos*. Te sientes, en tu interior, tan incómodo, si se dice alguna barbaridad y todo el mundo suelta una risotada o hace muecas, como el señor Longdon, y si una vez Lord Petherton no me hubiese revelado que a un hombre le sienta casi tan mal como a una mujer ser considerado timorato, yo diría que ahora mismo en Londres muchas veces debes de pasar muy malos ratos.

Precisamente el presente rato habría podido ser uno de ésos, habríamos inferido sin duda alguna, si hubiésemos visto plenamente reflejado en el rostro de Vanderbank el grado hasta el cual lo había turbado o al menos asombrado aquella pronta réplica. Pero era capaz de reírse en toda ocasión:

—¡Me hace gracia tu «ahora mismo en Londres»!

—Es el tono y la corriente y el efecto de las demás personas que te rodean lo que te arrastra consigo —continuó ella como si no lo hubiese oído—. Si tales cosas son contagiosas, como dicen todos, acaso tú lo demuestras tanto como el que más. Pero nunca eres tú quien empieza —siguió delineando aquello para él bastante comprensivamente—, o por lo menos no fuiste tú quien dio el primer paso en los inicios. Ahora mismo cualquiera se daría cuenta de eso… gracias al aterrador efecto que observo que te produzco hablando de este modo. Helo ahí: sale a la superficie antes de que sea posible darse cuenta, ¿verdad?, y yo no puedo remediarlo más de lo que puedes tú, ¿a que no? —Así semejó planteárselo ella, con algo en su claridad que habría resultado infinitamente conmovedor: una rara, seria, serena conciencia del desdichado destino de ambos y de lo que en éste había de especialmente fatídico para ella misma. Lo cierto es que tras un momento él se puso en pie de un salto como si se hubiese sentido infinitamente conmovido; se dio la vuelta, andando cerca de ella unos cuantos pasos de aquí para allá, volvió a contemplar el lugar en su derredor, aunque esta vez sin pinta de verlo realmente, y luego regresó junto a ella como desde una distancia bastante mayor. Un observador mínimamente iniciado habría estado, en esta coyuntura, enteramente pendiente de los labios de él, y a decir verdad Vanderbank presentó toda la apariencia —aunque ésta duró tan sólo el tiempo que tardamos en describirla— de un hombre en suspenso acerca de sí mismo. El más iniciado de los observadores habría sido el pobre señor Longdon, quien enseguida habría estado destinado, empero, a resultar asimismo el más decepcionado y cuyo estar en vilo se habría cifrado en un reprimido «¡Oh, ojalá él lo haga *ahora mismo*!». Pues bien, Vanderbank no lo hizo «ahora mismo», y tal vez el largo, extraño, improcedente suspiro que exhaló habría bastado como testimonio de haberse zafado de un riesgo que había durado justo lo necesario para calibrarlo. Entretanto, ¿se había dado alguna calibración del mismo por parte de Nanda? Al menos no hubo nada que denotara ni la presencia ni la desaparición de ansiedad en el modo en que, merced a una rauda transición, ella permitió que su última interpelación a él se defendiera por sí sola sin mayor turbación—: No has desmentido que Harold pide prestado.

Al hallarse en presencia de este terreno venturosamente más firme, Vanderbank hizo sonar una nota como de regocijo:

—Mi querida mujercita, yo nunca en mi vida le he prestado cinco libras al tontaina de tu hermano. De hecho, menuda forma tienes de aludir a eso. No sé muy bien por quién me tomas, pero el número de personas a quienes les *he* prestado cinco libras…

—…¿es tan minúsculo —recogió ella sus palabras— como para no decir demasiado en tu favor? —Ella lo cautivó un instante como con la penetrante comprensión que en esto había habido de la intención de él,

y luego, aunque no con brusquedad, espetó—: ¿Por qué tratas de hacerte pasar por antipático y tacaño? ¿Por qué falseas…?

—…¿mi natural generosidad? No falseo nada, pero soy, creo, inmensamente cuidadoso con el dinero. —Ella había permanecido en su asiento y él estaba ante ella sobre la hierba con las manos en los bolsillos y una actitud quizá una pizca desmañada—. ¡Hay que ver cómo habláis de dinero vosotros los jóvenes!

—Harold habla de dinero… pero creo que *yo* no. Yo no salgo nada cara; pregunta a mamá, o incluso pregunta a papá. Me las apaño con una nimiedad… para ropa y cosillas; y fácilmente podría apañármelas con todavía menos. Harold es un consumidor nato, como dice Mitchy; también dice que Harold es una de esas personas que nunca pasarán estrecheces.

—Huy, de eso se encargará el propio Mitchy.

—Pues entonces, con todo el mundo ayudándonos por todos lados, ¿no somos una bonita familia? No digo todo esto para poner a nadie al descubierto, pero es que cuando mencionas que has recibido carta de Harold se me pasan inmediatamente por la cabeza toda clase de cosas. Todos nosotros parecemos estar más o menos viviendo de otras personas, todos enormemente «en deuda». Claro que con facilidad puedes decir que yo soy la peor. Los niños y sus sirvientes, en Bognor, se hallan en habitaciones prestadas (mamá consiguió que se las facilitasen), respecto de lo cual, sin la menor duda, soy perfectamente consciente de que yo debería estar allí compartiéndolas, cuidando de mi hermanito y de mi hermanita, en vez de estar aquí sentada a expensas del señor Longdon divulgándolo todo y criticando. ¡Papá y mamá, en Escocia, están haciendo una gira por mansiones ajenas…! Bueno —se refrenó—, en todo caso yo no estoy haciendo *eso*. Digamos que sólo le has prestado cinco chelines a Harold —retomó la cuestión.

Vanderbank permaneció de pie, sonriendo:

—Vale, digamos que lo he hecho. Jamás le presto un solo penique más a nadie.

—Eso no puede sino reforzar mi convencimiento —explicó Nanda— de que Harold manda cartas al señor Longdon.

—Pero si el señor Longdon no dice nada sobre ello… —objetó Vanderbank.

—Oh, eso no demuestra nada. —Ella se puso en pie mientras hablaba—. También Harold explota a la abuela. —Al principio él se limitó a lanzar una carcajada ante esto, pero ella continuó—: Pensarás que estoy caracterizándome como inauditamente perspicaz… quiero decir, en el sentido de saberlo todo sin necesidad de que me cuenten nada. Ésa *es*, como dices tú, la gran cualidad de mamá, luego debe ser hereditaria. Por lo demás, me da la impresión de que a servidora más bien le cuentan *demasiadas* cosas. Sólo que lo cierto es que el señor Longdon no ha dicho nada.

Ella había mirado en derredor con aire de responsabilidad, como para no dejar en desorden el rinconcito del jardín que habían estado ocupando, recogiendo un periódico y modificando la colocación de un cojín.

—Lo que pienso es que con el señor Longdon te conduces de un modo notable —comentó Vanderbank —, considerando por un lado todo lo que tú pareces saber y por el otro todo aquello sobre lo cual él guarda silencio. Entonces ¿qué es lo que *sí* dice? —preguntó el joven tras una leve pausa y quizá incluso con una leve irritación.

Nanda volvió a contemplar el entorno; doblaba, bastante cuidadosamente, su periódico. Al punto su mirada recayó sobre su mutuo amigo, quien, habiendo salido de la mansión por una de las puerta-ventanas que daban al césped, se había detenido a contemplarlos desde allí.

—En este preciso instante dice que ya está listo el almuerzo.

XXV

—Yo lo he obligado —le dijo Nanda a Mitchy en el salón— a obligar al señor Van a acompañarlo.

El señor Longdon, bajo la lluvia, la cual se había presentado desde la mañana, se había marchado a la iglesia, y su otro invitado, con bastante señalado buen humor, se había prestado a hacerle compañía. Las ventanas del salón miraban hacia el mojado jardín, todo vivido e intenso bajo el chubasco estival, y Mitchy, tras haber visto a Vanderbank ceñirse los pantalones y responder animosamente con una última pulla a la no enteramente sincera befa suscitada por su sumisión, había aceptado pródiga y campechanamente la perspectiva no sólo de un agradecido césped refrescado, sino también de una hora larga entre lo más granado, como había dicho él, de sus presentes circunstancias venturosas. La benéfica lluvia, el precioso lugar antiguo, la deliciosa mansión solemne, la gran habitación inimitable, la ausencia de los demás moradores, la actual visión de lo que su joven amiga le había ofrecido a su consideración: la conciencia de estos deleites se expresó en su clavada y copiosa mirada saltona. Al principio se sintió demasiado complacido incluso para tomar asiento: midió aquel gran espacio de punta a cabo, tomando a admirar todo lo que ya había admirado antes y volviendo a declarar que ningún ingenio moderno —ni siquiera el suyo propio, al cual hacía justicia— sería capaz de crear efectos de tal pureza. El toque final en todo el cuadro que tenían ante sí era precisamente la inconsciencia del artífice. El señor Longdon no había diseñado su hogar, se había limitado a vivirlo, y el «gusto» de su residencia —en ciertos respectos Mitchy abominaba de esa palabra— no era sino la propia belleza de su existencia personal. Todo por todas partes había caído directamente del cielo, sin absolutamente ningún indicio de transacción comercial ni una sola marca de fábrica o etiqueta de origen. Todo esto habría sido un maravilloso tema de conversación en Buckingham Crescent: un ejercicio tan dichoso para los seguidores de aquel templo de la especulación analítica, que repetidamente Mitchy había declarado que su común experiencia de aquello reclamaba a gritos la presencia de la señora Brook. Las cuestiones que aquí se ponían en danza para una mente receptiva eran justamente aquellas que, como decía él, más los hacían sentirse vivos. La excusa de Vanderbank para no salir durante la mañana había sido un rimero de cartas que despachar, y Mitchy —que a aquella hora había bajado de su habitación, como ya había anunciado desde el comienzo, dispuesto a todo— había ido a la iglesia con el señor Longdon y Nanda en el más fino espíritu de curiosidad. Ahora —tras el comentario de la muchacha— le volvió la espalda a su contemplación de la lluvia, que extrañamente le había parecido distinta de cualquier otra lluvia, al igual que todo lo demás también era distinto, y respondió que sabía muy bien lo que ella era capaz de obligar a hacer al señor Longdon, pero que no acertaba a figurarse cuál era el secreto del señor Longdon para manejar a su amigo. Estaba de pie ante ella con las manos en los bolsillos y el agradecimiento espejeando desde cada uno de los lunares amarillos de su corbata roja:

—Misa vespertina en un domingo lluvioso de una pequeña localidad rural no es moco de pavo. ¿Es que Van hace todo lo que desea su anfitrión?

—Quizá es que lo ha asaltado una sospecha de lo que deseo *yo* —explicó Nanda—. Puesto que deseo hablarte seriamente…

—…¿se ha quitado de en medio para facilitarme las cosas? Pues entonces, como de costumbre, Van es sencillamente magnífico. ¿Cómo expresar la felicidad de hallarme a solas contigo en este armonioso recinto antiguo, esta beatitud nunca vista? Nada es más encantador que topamos súbitamente con algo intenso y nuevo después de haber creído que ya nunca habría nada más que nos estremeciese. Suponemos que ya hemos pasado por todo, que ya hemos exprimido hasta la última impresión del desengaño definitivo, penetrado hasta el último recoveco de la mayor de las sorpresas; y hete aquí que un buen día caemos en la cuenta de que no le hemos hecho justicia a la vida. Hay cosillas que imprevistamente nos salen al encuentro y nos hacen volver a vibrar. Pensándolo bien, es infinito lo que *puede* suceder. Un sencillo lanzamiento de dados y durante tres minutos somos los ganadores. Éstos, mi querida señorita, son mis tres minutos. Te

parecería increíble la satisfacción que extraigo de ellos, y ¿cómo podría darte una idea aproximada? Aquí en esta estancia flota una tenue, divina fragancia antigua… ¿o es que no te llega? No habré vivido sin disfrutarla, aunque ahora me doy cuenta de haber estado convencido de que sí. Por tu parte, tú no habrás vivido sin cierto matiz de grandiosidad. Este momento es grandioso, y tú lo has ocasionado. Habrás sido grandiosa al sentir todo lo que *puedes* ocasionar. Por lo tanto —siguió Mitchy, deteniéndose nuevamente, conforme ambulaba, ante un retrato—, no lo estropearé todo con la grosería de desear que ojalá yo también poseyera una obra maestra de Cotman.

—¿Has abandonado algo *muy* importante para acudir? —inquirió Nanda.

—En el mundo entero, hija mía, ¿qué hay que sea muy importante salvo la belleza de esta ocasión? No tengo ni la menor idea de *qué* abandoné al recibir la nota del señor Longdon. No me pidas un recuento de nada: todas las cosas se fueron al… se volvieron prescindibles. *Sí* diré esto en mi favor: siembro mi desconsideración, me olvido de las personas, con una facilidad que, durante intervalos, durante cortos periodos, por lo que a ellas atañe, me hace dejar de *existir*, así es que mi vida está profusamente punteada por estados transitorios en que soy como esos muertos de quienes sólo se habla bien. —Sonriéndole, había vuelto a aproximarse a ella—. He muerto para asistir a esto, Nanda.

—La única dificultad que advierto —repuso ella acto seguido— es que deberías casarte con una mujer realmente inteligente y no estoy segura de hasta qué punto lo es Aggie.

—¿Aggie? —hizo de eco su amigo con gran suavidad—. ¿Para *eso* has mandado llamarme: para hablar de Aggie?

—¿No se te ocurrió pensar que podía ser así?

—¿Que no podía ser, quieres decir, para ninguna otra cosa? —Él buscó con la mirada el asiento al ocupar el cual expresaría una más profunda entrega a aquel escenario, después se dejó caer pesadamente en él con una hermosa sumisión rauda—: No tengo ni idea de lo que se me ocurrió pensar… por lo menos ninguna salvo la sensación de que *a ti* se te había ocurrido pensar en mí. Los pensamientos son arcilla en manos del alfarero. Haz conmigo lo que se te antoje.

—Sabes apreciarlo todo tan maravillosamente —dijo Nanda— que no te costará mucho trabajo apreciarla *a ella*. Me atenaza mi sueño de que tú puedes salvarla; y por eso no he sido capaz de esperar más.

—Lo único que me queda en la vida —respondió él— es cierta tendencia a cavilar qué me es factible hacer a fin de significar algo para ti; pero precisamente es una cavilación que tú puedes colaborar a aclarar. Por ejemplo podrías ofrecerme alguna garantía o prenda de que si consigo significar (gracias a mis cabriolas y caracoleos y espectaculares estampidas) nunca me relegarás a la insignificancia. Creo que no hay aventura en que no esté dispuesto a embarcarme por ti; pero aun así mi pasión (disciplinada, a causa de todo esto, depurada, espiritualizada) es lo bastante de este mundo como para no haber renunciado enteramente a la esperanza de alguna pequeña recompensa.

—¿Cuán pequeña? —preguntó la muchacha. Ella habló como si sintiese que debía aceptar de él, por simple sentido de la equidad, al menos tanto como lo que ella iba a hacerlo aceptar, y la grave transigencia turbada que tal sentimiento infundió en su propio tono fue acogida por Mitchy con una razonabilidad deleitada que en nada fue camuflada por su afición a las hipérboles. Él se sonrojó de placer admitiendo plenamente que había algo que estaba dispuesto a negociar con ella, pero asegurando con cada uno de sus tenues sonidos que no había altura a que ella pudiera elevar la negociación adonde él no pudiera seguirla. En cada una de las entonaciones y gestos masculinos hubo, saltando de éstos a aquéllas y viceversa, una implicación de lo exquisito. ¡Oh, vaya si él podía estar a esa altura!

—Caray, me refiero a instituir un vínculo entre nosotros dos —contestó Mitchy—. Me refiero a que de alguna forma hagas que nos sintamos más unidos: que ambos sepamos alguna cosa que nadie más sepa. Me gustaría indescriptiblemente que compartieras un secreto conmigo.

—Oh, si eso es todo lo que deseas, resultas sencillo de satisfacer. *Rien de plus facile*, como dice mamá. Estoy repleta de secretos: creo que de veras soy de lo más secretista. Estoy dispuesta a compartir contigo casi cualquiera de ellos… es decir, suponiendo que sea uno que merezca la pena.

Mitchy vaciló:

—¿Quieres decir que lo escogerás tú misma? ¿No permitirás que sea uno de los míos?

Nanda se extrañó:

—Pero ¿es que habría alguna diferencia?

De un salto su compañero volvió a ponerse en pie y por un momento se adueñó del lugar:

—¡Cuando dices cosas así, eres de una hermosura…! ¿*Puede* ser —preguntó deteniéndose ante ella— uno de los míos: uno absolutamente feo?

Ella exhibió el más vivo interés:

—Dado que estoy convencida de que los secretos más feos son los mejores… sí, desde luego.

—Me siento bochornosamente tentado. —Mas hizo una tregua; luego, volviendo a dejarse caer en su silla, dijo—: Sería demasiado horrible. Me temo que no soy capaz.

—En tal caso, ¿por qué no *éste*, tal como es?

—¿«Éste»? —Con la mirada él escudriñó la gran estancia acogedora—. ¿Cuál?

—Canastos, ¿para qué estás aquí?

—Mi querida amiga, estoy aquí (por encima de todo) para amarte más que nunca; y de *eso* está ausente cualquier fascinante misterio…

Ella lo miró como viendo lo que él quería decir y únicamente deseando ponerle remedio:

—Hay cierta dosis de misterio que en este momento podemos *crear*… que de hecho me parece que *debemos* crear. Querido Mitchy —continuó casi con vehemencia—, creo que en realidad no *podemos* contarle esto a nadie.

Él se había recostado en su asiento, ahora sin mirarla y con las manos, ayudadas por los apoyados codos, entrelazadas para mantenerse más tranquilo:

—¿Aún estás hablando de Aggie?

—¡Pero si apenas he empezado!

—¡Ah! —No fue irritación lo que él semejó expresar, sino la ligera tensión de un esfuerzo por adentrarse en el asunto. Para mejor fijar esa imagen, cerró los ojos un breve rato.

—Hablas de algo que nos haga sentimos más unidos, y yo sencillamente respondo que si no sientes cuán juntos estamos ya en esto, creo que no podrás sentirlo jamás. Debes de tener una noción exagerada —siguió a continuación— de lo que es un estado ideal de unión. Los despacho fuera a todos por ti: me deshago de cualquier cosa que pueda interferir, y no me importa en absoluto que te enteres de que me parecen preciosas las consecuencias. *Tú* podrás hablar, si quieres, de lo que aquí pase entre nosotros pero, lo que es yo, nunca se lo mencionaré a persona alguna: literalmente a ningún bicho viviente. ¿Qué más quieres? —Él abrió los ojos en deferencia a esta pregunta, pero respondió solamente con una mirada fija tan desprovista de todo acompañamiento como si se hubiese efectuado a través de un agujero en una cortina—. Afirmas estar dispuesto a cualquier aventura, y precisamente es una aventura lo que te propongo. Si pudiera hacer que sintieras tú mismo tal como yo siento *por* ti la belleza de tu oportunidad de intervenir para salvar a Aggie…

—¿Qué pasaría si pudieras? —espetó Mitchy por fin—. No creo, ¿sabes? —dijo, pasado un momento—, que vaya a serte fácil conjugar todos los factores del caso.

Ella reflexionó un rato más prolongado; por último declaró:

—Uno de esos factores eres tú, de modo que jugarás a *mi* favor. Si te pongo en juego de una forma eficaz…

—…¿te sentarás tan campante y te limitarás a verme obrar? ¡Muchas gracias! ¿*Esa* será mi recompensa?

Ante esto Nanda se levantó de su sofá como con un impulso de protesta:

—¿Te importará un rábano mi agradecimiento, mi admiración?

—Claro que no —pareció decir Mitchy para sí mismo—. *Eso* sí me parecerá sustancioso. Lo que no acabo de entender, ¿sabes?, es qué le *debes* a Aggie. ¡No es como si…! —Pero aquí titubeó.

—…¿como si ella me amara especialmente *a mí*? Oh, eso no influye para nada en la cuestión: eso es algo sin lo cual es perfectamente posible ser una bellísima persona. Hay personas admirables, absolutamente admirables, que no me aman. Lo que es importante para uno es lo que uno contempla por su cuenta, y es más que bastante si *yo* contemplo lo que puede hacerse por esa chiquilla. ¡Cásate con ella, Mitchy, y ya verás a quién amará más que a nadie!

Mitchy conservó su postura: ahora mismo era él —había sido vuelta del revés su descripción de hacía un instante— quien parecía estar sentado tan campante y limitarse a ver obrar.

—¡Es indescriptiblemente maravilloso —exclamó— que me pidas cualquier cosa, sea la que fuere!

—Pues entonces, como yo digo, sálvala hermosa y munificamente.

—Como tú digas, conforme. —Él inclinó la cabeza dulcemente—. Pero sin que hayas logrado hacerme comprender qué entiendes exactamente por eso.

—Impídele —contestó Nanda— volverse como la duquesa.

—Pero si ni de lejos se parece a la duquesa en ningún aspecto. Aggie es una criatura completamente distinta.

Sólo durante un instante, empero, pareció hacer efecto aquella objeción.

—Precisamente por eso será tan perfecta para ti —dijo la muchacha—. La alejarás, la sacarás fuera de la vida de su tía.

Ahora Mitchy acogió todo aquello con una especie de inmovilidad fascinada:

—¿Qué sabes tú sobre la vida de su tía?

—¡Oh, yo lo sé todo! —Ella habló con su primer tenue matiz de impaciencia.

Por unos instantes esto produjo entre ellos un silencio, al término del cual su compañero dijo con extraordinaria gentileza y ternura:

—¡Mi querida Nanda! —El silencio de ella semejó prolongarse voluntariamente y la insinuación contenida en el mismo habría podido ser que para un buen entendedor no hacía falta añadir palabra alguna a la declaración que ella acababa de hacer, declaración que Mitchy permaneció sentado asimilando como bajo una nueva luz. De hecho, enseguida él pasó a exteriorizar lo que había sacado en claro—: Eres maravillosamente interesante. Desde luego… sabes una barbaridad de cosas. ¿Cómo ibas a no saberlas… y para qué?

—«¿Para qué?». ¡Oh, eso es una cuestión diferente! Pero ni te imaginas lo que sé; estoy segura de que es mucho más de lo que tienes idea. Así es como actualmente *somos* todas… todas excepto esa pequeña maravilla que es Aggie. ¿Por quién diantres —insistió la muchacha— nos habías tomado?

—¡Está bien! —resolló Mitchy, divinamente manso.

—Puedo asegurar que yo no sé si lo está; no me extrañaría que de hecho estuviera mal. Pero al menos lo que sin duda está bien es que servidora no finja otra cosa diferente. Ahí me tienes, en cualquier caso. Ahora bien, la singularidad de Aggie es que ella no sabe nada… nada de nada: ni tan siquiera la más pequeña pizca de cosa alguna.

Fue apenas perceptible que Mitchy dudó, y habló con bastante gravedad:

—¿La has explorado?

—Ya lo creo. Y también lo ha hecho Tishy. —La gravedad de él resultó menor que la de Nanda—. Absolutamente nada de nada. —A ella tal vez le volvió a la memoria con renovado hechizo el recuerdo de alguna escena o algún episodio—: ¡Ah, di lo que quieras, pero así *es* como deberíamos ser todas!

Tras un minuto de gran intensidad, Mitchy había dejado de mirarla; cambiando de postura y apoyando los codos sobre las rodillas, durante un rato ocultó la cara entre las manos. Luego se puso en pie de un tirón:

—Hay una cosa que me gustaría enormemente confesarte. Pero no soy capaz.

Tras un lento ademán negativo, Nanda lo abrumó con una de sus más sombrías sonrisas:

—No hace falta que la confieses. Sé perfectamente de qué se trata. —Lo atalayó un momento, transcurrido el cual prosiguió—: Sencillamente se trata de que te gustaría que yo acertase a comprender que *tú* eres un hombre a quien, con plena sinceridad, se le da una higa de lo espantosos…

—¿Y bien? —Al quedarse ella en silencio, él se había encendido con una nueva vehemencia.

—…que puedan ser los conocimientos de servidora. En ti ello no ofende ningún prejuicio heredado.

—¡Oh, «heredado»!… —se lamentó Mitchy extáticamente.

—Incluso te gusto más a causa de ellos; así es que una de las razones por las cuales no habrías sido capaz de confesármelo (aunque naturalmente, bien lo sé, no la única) es que literalmente te habrías sentido casi abochornado. Porque, ya sabes —siguió—, *es* asombroso.

—¿Es asombroso que yo carezca de…?

—Sí: de cualquier repugnancia hereditaria en presencia del hecho del cual estoy hablando. Hay una especie de conciencia que no posees.

Nuevamente la apreciación masculina la atalayó con mirada saltona:

—¡Oh, vaya si lo sabes todo!

—Eres tan amable que nada te escandaliza —perseveró ella lúcidamente—. Hay una especie de sensibilidad que no tienes.

Se sentía cada vez más impresionado:

—¿Sólo tengo la de (por así decirlo) la piel y el tacto? —interpeló.

—Oh, y la de la inteligencia. Y la del espíritu. Y algunas otras especies, sin duda alguna. Pero no *la* especie.

—Ya. —La curiosidad masculina había sido aguzada—. Supongo que ésa es la única forma de denominarla. —Tal forma pareció erguirse allí ante él—: ¡*La* especie!

—La especie de sensibilidad que me volvería inaceptable para ti. O, mejor dicho, quizá no a mí misma —agregó como para arrojar la mayor cantidad de luz sobre la discusión—, sino a mis circunstancias, mis experiencias… a todas las consecuencias de ellas que son discernibles en mí. ¿Es que una no acaba convirtiéndose en algo así como un pequeño sumidero por donde fluye de todo?

—¿Por qué no describirte más elegantemente —preguntó Mitchy, nuevamente impresionado— como

una pequeña arpa eólica colocada junto a la ventana del salón y que vibra con las corrientes de la charla?

—Oh, porque el arpa devuelve un sonido y *nosotras* (por lo menos eso procuramos) no devolvemos ninguno.

—¿Lo que recibís, quieres decir, se os queda adentro?

—Vaya, se nos queda pegado. ¡Y eso es lo que a ti no te importa!

Ante esto sus miradas se encontraron largo rato.

—Sí…, entiendo. A mí *no* me importa. Tengo las más terribles limitaciones.

—Oh, no sé nada sobre tus otras limitaciones —repuso Nanda—; no he reparado en ellas. Pero tienes ésa, y es suficiente.

Continuó encarándola con su extraña mezcla de asenso y reticencia:

—Querida mía, suficiente ¿para qué? ¿Para volverme imposible para ti porque el único hombre a quien podrías, como suele decirse, «respetar» sería un hombre a quien *sí* le importase? —Después, como finalmente ella apartara de él la mirada bajo la suave presión tranquila de aquella pregunta, él dijo—: El hombre con «*la* especie», como dices tú, ¿resulta ser precisamente la tipología que *puedes* amar? Pero ¿qué sentido tiene —perseveró al no dar ella respuesta— amar a una persona caracterizada por el prejuicio (hereditario o de cualquier otra clase) según el cual eres ni más ni menos que aberrante? ¿Es que decididamente *gozas* amando en vano?

Ésta era una pregunta, según pareció decirlo la forma como ella volvió a encararlo, que merecía una concienzuda respuesta:

—Sí. —Mas ella principió a pasearse tras haber hablado, y la mirada de Mitchy la siguió por diversas partes de la habitación mientras, con pequeños pretextos de adecentarla en ese momento, pequeñas modificaciones en aras de la simetría, ella la recorría pausadamente.

—Lo que en tal caso resulta singular —observó él— es tu ocurrencia de que yo vaya a hallar algún encanto en la ignorancia de Aggie.

De inmediato ella depositó una vieja caja de rapé.

—Caramba, es la única clase de cosa que todavía no has probado. No puedes ni imaginarte —dijo mientras volvía junto a él— el efecto que producirá en ti. En verdad debes acercarte a ello y verlo brotar íntegramente para sentir toda su atracción. Te gustará, Mitchy —y fue extraordinaria la seriedad de Nanda —, más que todas las cosas que *has* probado.

La patente sinceridad de esto, aun si no hubiese habido nada más, imponía una reflexión que esta vez Mitchy flagrantemente sí fue capaz de confesar, sin por ello dejar de acrecentar su deferencia en su insinuación de dificultades:

—Entonces tengo que hacer, con esta bonita cualidad de Aggie, lo que dices que *tú* has hecho: «explorarla». —Después, como quiera que el asentimiento femenino, tan abiertamente solicitado, se hizo esperar, inquirió—: Pero ¿acaso mi acercamiento a dicha cualidad, por cauto que sea, no será precisamente lo que la estropeará y la hará pedazos?

Nanda reflexionó:

—¿Por qué iba a hacerlo… si mi propio acercamiento no lo ha hecho?

—Huy, es que tú no eres yo.

—Pero soy igual de mala.

—¡Muchas gracias, preciosa! —dijo Mitchy con retintín.

—Sin —completó Nanda— ser ni la mitad de buena. —Tras esto ella tuvo, en una clave diferente, su propia explosión repentina—: ¿Es que no te das cuenta, Mitchy querido (ante el inmenso cariño que implica todo esto), de lo buenísimo que estoy *convencida* de que eres?

Ella había hablado como con una llamarada de disgusto ocasionada por cierta sensación de que él no le había hecho justicia, y tras un atónito instante esto lo movió a acercarse a ella lo suficiente como para cogerle la mano. Ella le permitió cogérsela y, a guisa de mudo voto solemne, él se la llevó a los labios, transmitiéndole así más cosas que de cualquier otro modo; lo cual sin embargo, cuando la hubo soltado y hubo transcurrido una pausa inmóvil, no lo previno de seguidamente pronunciar tres palabras:

—¡Oh, Nanda, Nanda!

El tono masculino la volvió extraordinariamente tierna otra vez:

—Entonces no «explores» nada. Dalo todo por sentado.

Él le había vuelto la espalda y anduvo maquinalmente, con aire de emoción aturdida, hasta la ventana, donde permaneció un rato contemplando el exterior.

—Ha dejado de llover —dijo a la postre—; va a salir el sol.

La estancia tenía tres ventanas, y Nanda se llegó hasta la ventana contigua:

—Aún no, pero creo que terminará saliendo.

Pronto Mitchy tornó a mirar hacia el interior de la habitación, en la que tras una breve vacilación se adentró, tan sigilosamente —casi tan cautamente— como si anduviese de puntillas, hasta alcanzar el asiento ocupado por su compañera al comienzo de la charla. Se dejó caer pesadamente en él contemplando a la muchacha, quien aún permaneció mirando hacia el jardín un rato más.

—Quieres que yo, según dices, la saque fuera de la vida de la duquesa; pero ¿cómo estoy yo mismo, si a eso vamos, sino aún más metido que Aggie *dentro* de la vida de la duquesa? Estoy dentro de ella debido a mis contactos, mis compañías, mis indiferencias: todas mis transigencias, complicidades, diversiones. Estoy dentro de ella debido a mis cinismos: esos a los que desde el principio, cuando comencé a descubrir la vida y el mundo por mi cuenta, fui abocado y de los que me he visto impregnado por las circunstancias; estoy dentro de ella debido a una clase de desesperación que tal vez yo nunca habría sentido si te hubieses hecho cargo de mí mucho antes con el mismo estilo con que te has hecho cargo de mí hoy; y por encima de todo estoy dentro de ella (tú misma tendrás que reconocerlo) debido al mismísimo hecho de que la tía de Aggie desea, incluso mucho más que tú, como bien sabes, que tu plan se lleve a cabo. ¡Entonces la duquesa y yo *estaremos* hombro con hombro!

Nanda lo escuchó inmóvil hasta el final, demorándose además aún otro minuto para darles vueltas a las palabras masculinas.

—¿Qué es lo que tanto te atrae de Lord Petherton? —preguntó acercándose a él.

—¡Mi querida amiga, ojalá supieses decírmelo tú! Sería, ¿verdad? (debe de haberlo sido), un tema estupendo para una fábula, si se creasen fábulas hoy día, o, mejor aún, para un guiñol navideño: «El gigante y el gnomo».

Nanda intentó —sin excesivo éxito— imaginarse aquello:

—¿Te parece un gnomo Lord Petherton?

Al principio Mitchy, por todo agradecimiento, se limitó a mirarla fijamente.

—¡Muy amable, Nanda, muy amable!

—Para Lord Petherton un hombre tiene muchísimo de gigante —completó ella— cuando su fortuna es gigantesca. Él se dedica a depredarte.

Con las manos en los bolsillos y las piernas muy separadas, Mitchy estaba allí sentado en una postura consonante con la franqueza de ella.

—Eres adorable. *Tú* no me depredas. Pero *es* algo sórdido, ¿verdad? —recapituló enseguida.

El momentáneo silencio femenino habría podido ser en sí mismo respuesta suficiente.

—Nada de todo lo que dices —contestó ella de todos modos— tendrá relevancia después de tu casamiento. Ella simplificará tu vida hasta extremos insospechados. —Él permaneció tal como estaba, sólo que orientando su mirada hacia ella; y a la sazón ella había vuelto a llegarse hasta la ventana, a través de la cual había principiado a filtrarse débilmente un tenue rayo de sol. Al verlo, ella abrió la fenestra para dejar entrar aquel cálido cambio—: La lluvia *ha* cesado.

—Dices que anhelas que yo la salve. Pero lo que en realidad quieres decir —reanudó la plática Mitchy desde el sofá— no es eso en modo alguno.

Sin prestar atención a aquel comentario, Nanda contempló la luz del sol:

—Ahora se estará muy bien en el jardín.

Su amigo se incorporó, tras un vistazo encontró sobre una silla próxima su notable gorra a rayas, y asiéndola se aproximó a la muchacha:

—Tu esperanza es que (ya que soy lo bastante bueno para merecerlo) ella me salvará *a mí*.

Ahora Nanda sí lo miró:

—¡Lo hará, Mitchy, lo *hará*!

Permanecieron un momento bajo la reaparecida luminosidad; tras lo cual maquinalmente él —como absorto en otros muy distintos cuidados— se puso la gorra.

—Pues entonces, ¿esa esperanza será la cosa…?

—¿La cosa? —inquirió ella sin entender.

—Córcholis, la cosa que nos habrá hecho sentimos más unidos (para que permanezcamos así, ya sabes) esta tarde. Me refiero al secreto de que hablábamos.

Ante esto ella le ofreció la mano que él había cogido unos minutos antes y ahora él se limitó a aferraría con la firmeza que aquello parecía infundir y exigir.

—¡Oh, servirá a tal efecto! —dijo ella mientras salían juntos.

XXVI

Había quedado convenido que él iba a despedirse a la mañana siguiente mientras que Vanderbank se quedaría otro día más. Para la cena de este domingo el señor Longdon había invitado a tres o cuatro de sus vecinos a fin de que «conocieran» a los dos caballeros de la capital, de tal forma que no fue hasta que se hubieron marchado los convidados, o en otras palabras hasta casi la hora de acostarse, cuando nuestros cuatro amigos pudieron volver a sentir, como en confianza, esa familiaridad de relación mutua que constituye el tema de nuestra pintura. Ello no impidió, sin embargo, que Nanda desapareciera escaleras arriba tan pronto como hubieron dicho adiós el médico y su mujer, y a decir verdad la forma como en cuanto sonaron las once el señor Longdon cumplió su ritual de asir una determinada palmatoria constituyó una expresión no menos clara de albergar una intención pareja. En él nada resultaba más afable que el contraste entre la rigurosidad de sus propias costumbres y su generosa tolerancia hacia las costumbres ajenas. En lo tocante a aquéllas deploraba, por lo visto, casi cualquier rasgo de similitud, y nadie había osado jamás averiguar cómo se habría tomado un indicio de imitación.

—El modo de lisonjearlo —dijo de improviso Mitchy cinco minutos después— no es hacerlo pensar que te pareces a él, sino dejarlo ver lo diferente que te das cuenta de que él puede tolerar considerarte. Quiero decir naturalmente sin llegar a odiarte.

—Pero ¿qué más te da *a ti* —preguntó Vanderbank— el modo de lisonjearlo?

—¡Mi querido amigo, más que tú, yo no he pasado aquí todo el día sin extraer conclusiones sobre el crédito que el señor Longdon ha abierto a tu favor!…

—¿Te refieres a la suma que va a conferir?

—Está en tus manos —dijo Mitchy— hacerla ascender hasta cuanto se te antoje.

—¿Eso quiere decir que el señor Longdon… nada en la abundancia?

Mitchy estaba de pie en la estancia en que su anfitrión los había abandonado y ante esta pregunta no tuvo al principio otra reacción que un expresivo gesto con los hombros referido a todo cuanto había en el aposento:

—¡Mira, juzga, adivina, siente!

Pero fue como si Vanderbank, junto al fuego, restringiese voluntariamente su atención:

—¡Oh, ese punto me importa un ardite!

Este episodio tenía lugar en la biblioteca y era consecuencia de que ellos hubieran confesado, cuando su mutuo amigo los había mirado con el candil en la mano, que una breve vigilia tranquila y un paquete de cigarrillos remacharían mejor que cualquier otra cosa la hermosa impresión de aquel día. En aquel momento Mitchy habría podido, juzgando a partir de la mirada que les dedicó el señor Longdon y cuyo secreto fue malogrado por la inconsciente luz del candil, encontrar base para una medición de las casi extremadas concesiones que el anciano les exigía que le exigiesen. La única condición que les fue impuesta fue no olvidarse de dejar cerrada la ventana más grande y apagada la lámpara de la biblioteca. Quizá se habrían sentido realmente divertidos si se hubiesen fijado mínimamente en la abierta puerta que, aparte aquello, se proponía dar fe de la concepción que el anfitrión tenía de aquellos que no se comportaban, a altas horas de la madrugada, igual que se comportaba *él*. Lo cierto es que, merced a su retirada, él los había dejado allí —y de manera harto apreciable— con cierto número de compañías nocturnas. Si una de estas presencias era el aire de misterio que él mismo había infundido, el continente de nuestros jóvenes exteriorizó una debida preparación para las otras. Mitchy, al oír lo poco que a Vanderbank «le importaba ese punto», se limitó a persistir un rato más en ese incesante dar vueltas a que había consagrado gran parte de su jornada, al cual lo abocaba raudamente cualquier premonición de inmediatas revelaciones y que, de no estar matizado por una discreción infinita, habría podido crispar los nervios de aquellos en quienes la excitación adoptaba manifestaciones menos rotatorias. Permaneció callado lo suficiente como para insinuar

que se sentía temeroso de que casi cualquier cosa que dijese pareciera demasiado alusiva; hasta que por fin asumió el riesgo como tantas otras veces:

—¡Qué antiguo edificio tan acogedor!

—De veras lo es —se limitó a decir Van; pero su acomodación sobre la voluminosa silla que acercó a la ventana abierta constituyó en sí misma casi una opinión. Era calurosa la noche de agosto y fresco y fragante el aire que se colaba. Vanderbank fumó con el rostro vuelto hacia el oscuro jardín y las tenues estrellas; al cabo de algunos momentos de lo cual echó un vistazo a su entorno más próximo—: ¿No te parece que el ambiente aquí dentro es más bien sofocante por culpa de esa enorme lámpara? Podemos apagarla, ya que están encendidas esas velas encima de la chimenea.

—¿Así? —Ni corto ni perezoso el servicial Mitchy complugo a su compañero y con igual prontitud percibió el efecto de la disminución lumínica sobre las características de la habitación, efecto que él loó cual si la intensidad de las tinieblas resultantes hubiese sido lo que exclusivamente había anhelado dicho compañero. Una vez más él habría podido hacer que Vanderbank reparase en que un hombre sensible a tantísimas cosas distintas nunca podría sentirse realmente incómodo, aunque lo cierto es que enseguida aquel personaje demostró estar ocupado con otro pensamiento:

—Creo que es mi deber informarte que le he contado al señor Longdon que ahora estáis al corriente tanto tú como la señora Brook. Se lo conté esta tarde durante nuestro retorno de la iglesia: no se lo había contado antes. Me propuso desviamos un poco para enseñarme nuevos aspectos del lugar y eso me facilitó la ocasión. Pero no se ha enfadado —prosiguió Vanderbank—. Lo único es que me parece que quizá ello lo anime a hablarte, conque es preferible que estés enterado de que está enterado. Pero me dijo que Nanda no está al corriente en absoluto.

Mitchy asimiló esto con una atención que denotó haber ya advertido cuánto se veía favorecida la charla gracias a la menos acalorante oscuridad:

—Y ¿eso es todo lo que pasó entre vosotros dos?

—Sí, prácticamente… excepto, como es natural, que lo hice comprender, me parece, cómo había sucedido eso de que yo no hubiera mantenido una estricta reserva.

—Oh, pero *sí* la has mantenido (¿es que él no ha acabado de darse cuenta?), o tal vez incluso has hecho algo mejor, ya que tienes dos tan excelentes personas que la mantienen *por* ti. ¿Es que le resulta difícil de creer que apoyamos tus aspiraciones?

Durante un rato Vanderbank pareció dejar sin contestar esta pregunta; perseveró en mirar fijamente hacia el jardín mientras fumaba y balanceaba la larga pierna que había colocado sobre el brazo de su silla. Cuando al fin habló, empero, fue con cierto énfasis, quizá incluso con cierta vulgaridad:

—¡Oh, memeces!

Mitchy se cernió pero sin detenerse:

—¿Quieres decir que no *puede* darse cuenta?

—Quiero decir que no es cierto lo que aseguras. No me hago ilusiones respecto de vosotros. Sé perfectamente cómo os sentís afectados, aunque desde luego me fío absolutamente de vosotros.

Mitchy guardó un breve silencio.

—¿Te fías de que no contaremos nada? —preguntó.

—De que no le contaréis nada a la propia Nanda… aunque naturalmente si les dijeseis algo a otros —continuó Vanderbank—, inmediatamente se precipitarían a revelárselo a Nanda.

—Yo no le he contado nada a nadie —dijo Mitchy.

—Estoy seguro de ello. Y tampoco la señora Brook.

—Me alegra que asimismo estés seguro de eso —repuso Mitchy—, pues ello no es sino hacerle justicia a la señora Brook.

—Oh, estoy totalmente tranquilo en cuanto a ella —dijo Vanderbank.

—¿Y sin interrogarla?

—Por completo.

—Y ¿estás igualmente tranquilo, sin interrogarme, en cuanto a que *yo* no te he traicionado? —Tras lo cual, mientras que, como a fin de dejar que esta pregunta patentizara sola su propia absurdidad, Vanderbank no dijo nada, su amigo siguió—: Debo decirte que hoy mismo estuve cerquísima de hacerlo.

—¿Por qué debes decírmelo? No me preocupan tus «estar cerquísima», y espero que no supondrás que me dedico a vigilarte o sondearte. La señora Brook habrá estado cerquísima —continuó Vanderbank como para despejar la cuestión—; pero tampoco ella lo habrá hecho. Se habrá sentido inequívocamente tentada…

—…¿pero no habrá cedido? —atajó Mitchy—. Exacto; helo ahí. *Yo* me sentí inequívocamente tentado pero no cedí. Creo que tu certidumbre sobre la señora Brook —agregó— demuestra que la conoces bien.

Ella es incapaz de nada deliberadamente odioso.

—Huy, de nada odioso en modo alguno —dijo Vanderbank meditabunda y suavemente.

—Sí; en términos generales uno sabe lo que ella *no* hará. —Tras lo cual Mitchy deambuló y reflexionó durante un rato—. Pero pese a la afirmación que te ha hecho el señor Longdon (o quizá precisamente a causa de que tú la has aceptado), creo que es mi deber informarte que estoy persuadido de que Nanda sí está al corriente de la oferta que él te ha hecho. Quiero decir que Nanda la ha adivinado.

—¡No me digas! —exclamó Vanderbank.

—De hecho hay aún más cosas —prosiguió su compañero— que me parece que me gustaría informarte.

—¡No me digas! —se limitó a repetir Vanderbank en un principio. Pero pasado un instante dijo—: Mi querido amigo, cuán agradecido me siento.

—De lo que hablo es de algo que de todas formas yo te habría revelado, y habría buscado otra ocasión si no se nos hubiese presentado ésta. —Mitchy habló como si las últimas palabras de su amigo hubiesen carecido de relevancia, y prosiguió mientras Vanderbank se incorporaba y, desplazándose sin ningún propósito definido, se llegaba hasta la chimenea colocándose de espaldas a ella—. Mi única vacilación habría estado motivada porque así voy a ocasionar que ahondemos en ciertas cosas de un modo que, cara a cara (dado el carácter privado de dichas cosas), yo diría que no hace feliz a la mayoría de los hombres. Pero si a ti no te molesta…

—Claro que no me molesta. De hecho, tal como ya te he declarado, te profeso un gran agradecimiento. —Con los hombros apoyados en la elevada repisa de la chimenea, Vanderbank pronunció estas palabras sin mirarlo directamente; fumó y volvió a fumar, luego contempló la encendida punta de su cigarrillo—. ¿Jurarías que Nanda está al corriente? —inquirió.

—Bueno, tal es mi impresión.

—Huy, cualquier impresión tuya (de esa especie) seguramente está en lo cierto. Si piensas que debo prestarle atención a ello, quedo auténticamente agradecido. ¿Era eso… er… lo que deseabas revelarme? —requirió Vanderbank con un leve titubeo.

Mitchy, contemplando al otro más de lo que el otro contemplaba a Mitchy, ejecutó con la cabeza un benevolente ademán resuelto:

—No.

Con la mirada concentrada en sus propias bocanadas de humo, Vanderbank pareció maravillarse:

—¿Lo que deseabas revelarme es… otra cosa?

—Otra cosa.

—¡No me digas! —exclamó Vanderbank por tercera vez.

La exclamación había sido imprecisa, pero el movimiento que la siguió fue preciso: echando a andar, el joven volvió a encontrarse junto a la silla de la cual se levantara y volvió a tomar posesión de ella a guisa de señal de ponerse a disposición de su amigo. Dicho amigo, empero, no sólo hizo una tregua sino que además disparó finalmente hacia un problema que podía suponerse que ya habían abandonado:

—Se me antoja extraño que el señor Longdon se figure (con lo prodigiosamente agudo que es) que Nanda *no* la ha adivinado. Jamás me había imaginado que él podría convivir aquí con ella en semejante intimidad (viéndola todos los días y prácticamente todo el día) y llamarse a semejante engaño.

Nuevamente apoltronado cuán largo era, Vanderbank le dio vueltas a aquello:

—Y sin embargo estoy plenamente convencido de que no eres tú quien se ha llamado a engaño.

Mitchy exhibió una inédita serenidad asertiva:

—Pues claro que no soy yo.

—Tal vez entonces —se le ocurrió a Vanderbank— es que en realidad no se lo cree ni él mismo.

—¿Y sólo lo afirma para ahorrarte inquietudes?

—Para que servidor pueda (de una manera perfectamente sincera consigo mismo) conservar la cabeza, como si dijéramos, y tomar su decisión atendiendo únicamente a su propio criterio.

—¿Es que todavía *tienes* que tomar tu decisión?

Van se demoró cierto rato en contestar.

—Todavía tengo que tomar mi decisión. —Ante esto Mitchy tomó, en la confidencial penumbra, a convertirse en un elemento lentamente resolutivo y vagamente agitado, de tal forma que su amigo continuó —: ¿Tu propósito es contribuir muy generosa y admirablemente a que la tome de una vez mediante el procedimiento de hacerme saber…?

—…¿que definitivamente renuncio —completó sus palabras Mitchy— a cualquier pretensión y a cualquier esperanza? Vaya, estoy dispuesto a demostrártelo. He empeñado mi palabra de que voy a solicitar en otra parte.

Vanderbank modificó su postura para encararlo más directamente:

—¿Vas a solicitar a la duquesa la mano de su sobrina?

—Está prácticamente decidido.

—Pero ¿desde cuándo?

Mitchy apenas titubeó:

—Desde esta tarde.

—Ah, en ese caso no está decidido con la propia duquesa.

—Con Nanda… de quien tan encantadoramente, como no lo habrás olvidado, ha sido el plan desde un principio.

Vanderbank demostró que el no haberlo olvidado en absoluto no era óbice para sentirse momentáneamente desconcertado:

—Pero, mi querido amigo, ¿qué está en condiciones de «decidir». Nanda?

—Mi sino —dijo Mitchy, deteniéndose notoriamente ante su compañero.

Ahora Vanderbank permaneció sentado unos instantes con la vista alzada, percibiendo la indefinición del raro semblante de su amigo.

—¡Los dos estáis fuera del alcance de mis entendederas! —exclamó por último—. No veo lo que sales ganando tú en concreto.

—Yo tampoco lo veía hasta que ella me ayudó a discernirlo. Entonces uno aprende a contemplar, en semejante coyuntura, por su cuenta. Y puesto que es ganancia todo lo que no es pérdida, no había nada que yo *pudiera* salir perdiendo. Ello —completó la explicación Mitchy— me aparta.

—Te aparta ¿de qué?

Esto, tal como Mitchy lo puso abiertamente de manifiesto, era más difícil de formular, pero al cabo logró expresarlo:

—Pues de parecer sugerirte que mi existencia, en un prolongado estado de soltería, pueda llegar a significar para ella una alternativa real.

—Pero una alternativa ¿a qué?

—¡Caray, pues a ser *tu* esposa, mecachis! —Tras estas palabras Mitchy volvió a ponerse a deambular, y su compañero, en presencia de aquellos renovados giros penumbrosos, se quedó sentado un minuto sin decir ni pío. Lo cierto es que antes de que Van pudiera resolverse a hablar, el otro ya había vuelto a ponérsele enfrente—: Disculpa mi vehemencia, pero naturalmente tú entiendes muy bien.

—No estoy fingiendo en modo alguno —dijo Vanderbank—, si bien un hombre *debe* entender. De lo que sí me hago cargo es de que me demuestras (con el hecho de que en todo caso hayas quedado así alejado de ella) que de cualquier manera no tendré, si dudo en «aceptar el pacto», ningún pretexto para decirme a mí mismo que puedo privarla…

—Sí, precisamente —asintió ahora educadamente Mitchy—:…de algo, bajo la forma de un hombre con *mi* cantidad de dinero, que ella pueda terminar lamentando haber perdido. Mi cantidad de dinero, ¿es que no te das cuenta? —agregó con extremada llaneza—, no significa nada para ella.

—Y tú deseas que quede convencido de que (por si acaso alguna vez me ha asaltado algún escrúpulo) ella ha tenido su oportunidad y la ha desdeñado.

—Por completo —sonrió Mitchy.

—Porque —pensativamente, con ayuda de su cigarrillo, Vanderbank ató los cabos sueltos— posiblemente ello me haga avenirme.

—¡Posiblemente! —exclamó riendo Mitchy. Permaneció inmóvil un momento más, casi como para ver desarrollarse ante sus ojos dicha posibilidad, e incluso se sobresaltó ante la siguiente emisión de voz de su amigo. Lo que de hecho espetó Vanderbank, empero, sólo consiguió hacerlo ponerse en movimiento:

—¿Tantísimo aprecias a la pequeña Aggie?

—Vaya —dijo Mitchy—, Nanda la aprecia. Y yo aprecio a Nanda.

—Eres absolutamente asombroso —reflexionó Vanderbank. Enseguida esta reflexión tuvo el efecto de hacerlo ponerse en pie; a decir verdad la meditación hizo presa de él después de que se hubiera erguido—: En tal caso no puedo impedir que se me pase por las mientes que con esa conducta tan insólita es más que probable que también me aprecies *a mí*.

—¿Qué quieres que le haga, mi querido Van? —preguntó Mitchy, sincero—. Es el tipo de cosa a que ya debes estar bastante acostumbrado. Pues en el momento presente (¡fíjate!), ¿no estamos concentrados en ti todos a una?

Fue como si Vanderbank hubiera conseguido parecer extrañado:

—¿«Todos»?

—Nanda, la señora Brook, el señor Longdon…

—Y tú. Entiendo.

—Nombres ilustres. Y todos los demás —prosiguió Mitchy— que no incluyo.

—Ah, tú eres el mejor de todos.

—¿Yo?

—Eres el mejor de todos —se limitó a reiterar Vanderbank—. De cualquier manera todo ello es sumamente extraordinario —manifestó—. Pero a ti globalmente te comprendo mejor que al señor Longdon.

—Oh, ¿acaso él y yo no somos iguales en gran medida: simples amantes de la vida? Es decir, de esa esencia más delicada de ella que cautiva a las conciencias…

—¿Las conciencias…? —se sumó a su vacilación su compañero.

—Vaya, cultivadas y exquisitas.

En labios de Mitchy estas palabras suscitaron una imagen que por un momento semejó fascinar a su amigo.

—En verdad uno se queda sin saber qué decir o hacer —dijo este último.

—Oh, debes considerarlo todo serenamente. Perteneces a una clase especial: eres uno de esos que, como dijimos hace poco (¿te acuerdas?), generan el terror sagrado. Las personas conformadas de esa manera deben arrostrar las consecuencias; al igual que deben arrostrarlas —siguió Mitchy— las personas conformadas como *yo*. ¡Ánimo pues!

Brindando este aliento, Mitchy se había desplazado hasta la silla vacía junto a la ventana, donde seguidamente se sentó; y muy bien pudo ser en emulación de sus previos giros y vueltas como ahora fue el propio Vanderbank quien comenzó a deambular. La meditación que este último sacó a la luz, no obstante, denotó cierta resistencia al consejo de Mitchy:

—En cualquier caso me alegro de que no voy a privarla de una fortuna.

—No vas a privarla de la mía, claro está —repuso Mitchy desde la silla—; pero ¿no depende de tu comportamiento, por lo menos en buena medida, su disfrute de la del señor Longdon?

Vanderbank se detuvo abruptamente:

—La idea del señor Longdon, ¿es conferirlo *todo*?

Mitchy lo atalayó con su mirada saltona:

—¿No habíamos quedado en que ese punto te importaba «un ardite»? Yo no he pasado aquí todo este tiempo —continuó ya que de momento su compañero no respondió nada— sin hacerme una idea de su patrimonio. *Es* indiscutible que nada en la abundancia.

Esto volvió a poner en movimiento a Vanderbank:

—Bueno, ella ni lo recibirá todo en un caso ni se quedará sin nada en el otro. Tan sólo recibirá una especie de donativo. Pero lo recibirá en cualquier caso.

—¡Ah, si estás seguro!… —se limitó a comentar Mitchy.

—¡No estoy seguro, maldita sea! —Luego (pues su voz se había mostrado irritada). Van habló con mayor serenidad—: Lo único es que aquí veo a Nanda (aunque naturalmente por deseo de él) toquetear todos los objetos como si fueran suyos y tributarle una visita aparentemente sin fin. ¿Qué es eso por parte *de él* sino una promesa?

Pues bien, Mitchy podía demostrar impertérrito que sabía muy bien qué era eso:

—Es una promesa, en no menor medida, a ti. El señor Longdon te lo pone todo ante los ojos. Te aprecia a ti ni una pizca menos que a ella.

—¡Peste y condenación! —suspiró Vanderbank con impaciencia.

—Ello es tan «desusado» como te plazca, pero es así —aseveró el inexorable Mitchy.

—Entonces, ¿el señor Longdon piensa que me avendré por *esto*?

—¿Por «esto»?

—Por la heredad, por todo lo que, como dices tú, me pone ante los ojos.

Mitchy guardó un breve silencio que habría podido significar una mudanza de color.

—¿Es que no es bastante? —inquirió. Pero acto seguido cambió de tercio—: ¡Naturalmente él desea (igual que yo) convidarte con gran tacto!

—Oh, qué bien —dijo Vanderbank de inmediato—. Vuestro «tacto» (el tuyo y el suyo) es maravilloso, y el de Nanda el más espléndido de todos.

La transitoria reanudación de la silenciosidad de Mitchy fue referida, según él mismo se las industrió para darlo a entender sin ambigüedad, a la última cláusula de la declaración de su amigo.

—Si no estás seguro —retomó la plática al poco—, ¿por qué no preguntas abiertamente al señor Longdon?

Otra vez Vanderbank, valga la expresión, se «ensimismó» un rato.

—Porque no creo que ello proceda —respondió.

—¿Qué entiendes por «proceder»?

—Pues que ello sea precisamente… ¿cómo suele decirse?… «limpio». O siquiera muy delicado o decente. Aceptar de él, bajo la forma de una garantía tan hermosamente ofrecida, tantísimo y encima pedir más: creo que no puedo hacer eso. Además, ya cuento con mi pequeña convicción. En cuanto a la pregunta en sí, el señor Longdon puede contestar debidamente que no es cosa de mi incumbencia.

—Entiendo —manifestó Mitchy—. Aparte, una indagación semejante podría hacerlo creer que te sientes más dubitativo de lo que acaso te sientas en realidad.

—Huy, en cuanto a *eso* —dijo Vanderbank—, me parece que a efectos prácticos él ya sabe cuánto.

—¿Y cuán poco? —Sin embargo el otro acogió esto con no mayor interés que si se hubiese tratado de un chiste malo, conque también Mitchy se dedicó a fumar unos instantes en silencio—. ¿Es el hecho de que hayas venido de visita aquí, quieres decir, sólo durante estos tres o cuatro días, lo que habrá fijado la medida de ello?

Esta vez la pregunta era de esas a las que probablemente el hablador exige respuesta, mas la sola respuesta inmediata de Vanderbank fue deambular y deambular.

—Deseo tan ardientemente mostrarme considerado con ella —dijo por fin.

—¡Eso espero! —Luego, sin venir a cuento, Mitchy retrocedió en la conversación—: ¿Quieres que pregunte *yo*?

Pero Vanderbank, pensando en otras cosas, había perdido el hilo:

—Que preguntes ¿el qué?

—¡Caramba, si ella recibirá algo…!

—…¿si no me muestro *suficientemente* considerado? —Van ya había recobrado la clave—. Cielos, no; preferiría que no hablases si no te hablan primero.

—Bueno, puede ser que *él* hable… ya que está al corriente de que estamos al corriente.

—No es probable, pues no comprende por qué te informé.

—No me informaste *a mí*, de sobra lo sabes —dijo Mitchy—. Informaste a la señora Brook.

—Bueno, *ella* te informó a ti, y que ella se fuera de la lengua es lo que constituye lo espinoso. El señor Longdon no puede disculparla de ninguna manera.

—¡Pobre señora Brook! —meditó Mitchy.

—¡Pobre señora Brook! —hizo de eco su compañero.

—Pero me parecía que habías dicho —ahondó aquél— que el señor Longdon no se ha enfadado.

—¿De que *tú* estés al corriente? En efecto, creo que no se ha enfadado. Pero no le hace gracia un posible alud de cotorreos y chismorreos.

—¡Ah! —dijo Mitchy con mansedumbre.

—En definitiva, ¿puedo fiarme absolutamente de ti cuando dices —reanudó la plática Vanderbank al poco— que Nanda se figura nuestros tejemanejes?

—Oh, ella no me lo confesó. Pero, a pesar de los pesares, tal es mi creencia.

—Pues bien —espetó Vanderbank finalmente—, yo mismo también lo creo así. Aunque sólo sea porque ella lo sabe todo —completó sin mirar a Mitchy—. Lo sabe todo, todo.

—Todo, todo. —Mitchy se irguió.

—Eso me dijo ayer ella misma —insistió Van.

—Y me lo ha dicho hoy *a mí*.

La vacilación de Vanderbank habría podido ser indicio de que se había sentido impresionado ante aquello:

—Vaya, no creo que fuese una información que ninguno de nosotros dos precisase. Pero claro está que ella no puede evitarlo —agregó—. Todo, literalmente todo, en Londres, en los ambientes en que vive, pulula en el aire que respira; de modo que, cuanto más *permanezca* en ellos, más sabrá.

—Más sabrá, no hay duda —corroboró Mitchy—. Pero no permanece en ellos, ya ves, mientras está aquí.

—En efecto. Sólo que parece haberse venido desde Londres con grandes acúmulos. Y no estará aquí eternamente —se apresuró a añadir Vanderbank.

—Ciertamente no si te casas con ella.

—Pero ¿no es ésa al mismo tiempo —preguntó Vanderbank— precisamente la dificultad?

Mitchy pareció desorientado:

—¿La dificultad?

—Caramba, en calidad de mujer casada volverá a empaparse del aire londinense.

—Sin duda. —¡Oh, vaya si Mitchy podía ser sincero!—. Pero la diferencia estribará en que en una mujer casada ello no tendrá importancia. Sólo tiene importancia en las muchachas incasadas —insistió plausiblemente—, y eso sólo en aquellas por quienes nadie siente compasión.

—El problema es —dijo Vanderbank, mas casi como si se limitara a enunciar una verdad general— que se trata justamente de un elemento que a veces puede operar como freno para la compasión. ¿No es más bien en las muchachas que nunca se casarán en quienes ello no tiene importancia? Para las demás constituye una extraña formación.

—¡Oh! ¡A mí no me importa! —declaró Mitchy.

Manifiestamente Vanderbank objetó:

—Ah, pero tu elección final…

—…¿ha sido de una clase bien diferente? —Durante esta media hora, en la ambigua oscuridad, hasta el momento Mitchy no había ofrecido una pinta tan llamativa—. La señorita que he nombrado no es mi *elección*.

—Pues bien, eso no es más que una mayor señal de que para ti las cosas son mucho más fáciles.

—¡Oh, «fáciles»! —se quejó Mitchy.

—No debemos, en cualquier caso, seguir levantados —dijo Vanderbank, que había consultado su reloj—. Las doce y veinticinco; buenas noches. ¿Apago las velas?

—Sí, te lo ruego. La ventana la cerraré yo —y Mitchy se dirigió hacia ella—. Ahora mismo sigo tu ejemplo; buenas noches.

Un instante después las velas estaban apagadas y el otro se había marchado, pero Mitchy, solo en la oscuridad, cara a cara con el indistinto jardín silencioso, aún permaneció allí.

Libro Octavo

TISHY GRENDON

XXVII

Al abrirle la puerta, el lacayo masculló su nombre sin excesiva convicción, y Vanderbank, pasando adentro, se encontró efectivamente —pues ya había advertido los síntomas— en solitaria posesión de las sillas y mesas, las encendidas lámparas y las flores. Consultó su reloj, que marcaba exactamente las ocho, y luego se dio la vuelta para hablar otra vez con el criado, quien empero, sin otro sonido y como avergonzándose en nombre de la casa, ya le había cerrado la retirada. En realidad no había nada que no ofreciera una bienvenida excepto la falta de puntualidad de la señora Grendon: el salón de esta dama, en la noche de enero, mostraba su elegancia gracias a un baño de electricidad rosada que se entremezclaba, al fondo de la perspectiva, con el resplandor tenuemente dorado de un retiro aún más sacrosanto. Tras un instante Vanderbank se dirigió hacia esta segunda habitación, que asimismo resultó estar deshabitada y que tenía sus pequeños globos incandescentes —discretamente limitados en número— revestidos de seda de color amarillo limón. Las paredes, cubiertas de delicadas molduras francesas, eran tan fúlgidas que parecían vagamente argénteas; en la baja chimenea francesa ardía un fuego francés. Había paño de color amarillo limón sobre el sofá y las sillas, una maravillosa labor de encerado en el suelo que en su mayor parte estaba desguarnecido y un ejemplar de una novela francesa forrado con papel azul sobre una de las mesas de patas finas. Vanderbank miró unos instantes en derredor como impresionado por el ambiente general, después se concentró en algo que le había llamado la atención en particular. Sencillamente se trataba de su propio nombre escrito en letras bastante grandes sobre el forro del libro francés y dotado, tras haber asido él el volumen, del poder de atraer su interés más intensamente cuanto más lo miraba. Farfulló, con misterioso propósito, antes de olvidarse del asunto, un discreto sonido inarticulado; tras lo cual, arrojando el libro en otro sitio con cierto énfasis, se desplazó hasta la repisa de la chimenea, junto a la cual por unos instantes sus ojos escudriñaron absortos el pequeño y cenizoso fuego de leños. Cuando volvió a alzarlos fue, al reparar en que andaba mal el hermoso reloj de la repisa, para tornar a consultar su propio reloj y luego echar un vistazo, en el espejo sobre la chimenea, al estado de su bigote, cuyas puntas retorció con el debido cuidado durante un momento. Mientras estaba así atareado, se percató de algo distinto y, volviéndose rápidamente, reconoció en el umbral de la habitación a la otra figura que el espejo acababa de reflejar:

—Ah, ¿eres tú? —dijo, con un raudo apretón de manos—. ¿Ya ha bajado la señora Grendon? —Pero Vanderbank ya había regresado en compañía de Nanda, mientras la saludaba, a la primera habitación, donde no estaban presentes más que ellos mismos, y Nanda había mencionado que creía que Tishy había dicho las ocho y cuarto, lo cual naturalmente significaba cualquier cosa que uno quisiera—. Huy, en ese caso no habrá nadie aquí hasta las nueve. Supongo que no examiné suficientemente mi invitación; la cual no me comunicaba, por cierto —agregó Vanderbank—, que tú ibas a estar presente.

—Ah, pero ¿por qué *tenía* que comunicártelo? —exclamó inocentemente la muchacha. Habló nuevamente, empero, antes de que él pudiera responder—: Yo diría que Tishy, cuando te escribió, aún no lo sabía.

—¿No sabía que yo iba a encontrarte acechándome? —preguntó riendo Vanderbank—. Es estupendo de todas formas, gracias a mi despiste, disfrutar así de un rato a solas contigo. ¿Has venido como avanzadilla de tu madre?

—Oh, no: estoy alojada aquí.

—¡Ah! —dijo Vanderbank.

—El señor Longdon se ha venido a Londres conmigo; yo me dirigí aquí, el pasado viernes, directamente desde la estación.

—¿Os despedisteis a la puerta de esta casa? —preguntó él con señalado humorismo.

Ella reflexionó un momento: se mostraba más seria.

—Sí —dijo—, pero sólo por un día o dos. Va a presentarse aquí esta noche.

—Bien. ¡Qué grata sorpresa!

—Se alegrará de verte —dijo Nanda, mirando las flores.

—Es rematadamente amable por su parte, cuando yo he sido tan grosero.

—¿Qué es eso de tan grosero?

—Pues no haberle escrito… no haber vuelto de visita.

—Ah, entiendo —dijo Nanda sencillamente.

Fue ésta una sencillez que, con gran evidencia, puso un tanto incómodo a su amigo:

—¿Él se ha… er… molestado? ¡Pero no es posible que se haya quejado! —agregó velozmente.

—Oh, él nunca se queja.

—Desde luego que no: eso no entra en su forma de ser. Pero es precisamente eso —dijo Vanderbank— lo que hace que uno se sienta tan miserable. He estado ferozmente ocupado.

—Él lo sabe… y le agrada —repuso Nanda—. Lo encanta tu laboriosidad. Y yo me he ocupado de él en toda la medida de mis posibilidades.

—Oh —dijo su compañero—, es obvio que lo has reconciliado. Quiero decir con esta dama.

—¿Con Tishy? Oh, por supuesto no puedo abandonarla… en compañía de nadie.

—En efecto —se puso jocoso Vanderbank otra vez—, eso es un requisito de Londres: no se puede dejar a nadie en compañía de nadie… expuesto a todos.

Por bienintencionado que fuese el chiste, empero, Nanda no lo cogió:

—El señor Grendon no está aquí —dijo.

—Muy bien, y ¿dónde está?

—De excursión en yate… pero ella no está segura.

—Entonces, ¿sois sólo tú y ella quienes habéis organizado esto juntas?

—Vaya —dijo Nanda—, ella está horriblemente atemorizada.

—Oh, ella no debería —repuso él— tomárselo a la tremenda. A propósito, ¿va a presentarse tu madre?

—Sí, y papá. En realidad toda esta reunión es por Mitchy y Aggie —continuó la muchacha— antes de que partan rumbo al extranjero.

—¡Ah, entonces ya entiendo por qué te has venido a Londres! Tishy y yo no somos la causa. Lo haces todo por Mitchy.

—Si quieres decir que no hay nada que yo no esté dispuesta a hacer por él, estás completamente en lo cierto. Siempre ha mostrado hacia mí toda una gentileza…

—…¿que culminó en su casamiento con tu amiga? —preguntó Vanderbank—. Ha sido encantador, ciertamente, y no pretendo rebajar el mérito de ello. ¡Pero la propia Aggie, me parece, tiene tales encantos ahora!…

—¿Verdad que sí? —Nanda se mostró ilusionada—. ¿Verdad que se ha desmadrado en el sentido más literal del término?

—Y también en el figurado… hasta salirse de rosca. ¡Pero es que cuando una persona joven trata íntimamente a Mitchy…!

—Eh, no debes decir nada en contra de eso. Yo misma lo he tratado íntimamente.

—¡Pero, hija mía…! —protestó Van sinceramente. Esto no fue, sin embargo, algo que recibiera atención.

—Yo ya sabía que acontecería así. Siempre acontece cuando las muchachas han sido de esa manera.

—¿Quieres decir como aparentemente ella *era*? Pero ¿acaso eso no hace que uno se pregunte ligeramente *si* ella era de esa manera?

—Oh, lo era: yo sé que lo era. Y también va a presentarse aquí Harold —pasó a informar Nanda—, otro de los beneficiarios de Mitchy. *Sería* todo un banquete, ¿verdad?, si fueran a presentarse todos ellos.

Vanderbank titubeó, y la mirada que le dirigió a la puerta habría podido ser indicio de cierta viva prevención hacia la aparición de la anfitriona o la llegada de otros invitados.

—Aunque no vayan a presentarse todos sus beneficiarios —dijo—, ya se ha presentado, en la forma de mi persona, sospecho, casi el mayor de ellos.

—Huy, ¿qué es lo que Mitchy ha hecho por ti? —preguntó Nanda.

Otra vez su amigo guardó silencio; luego dijo:

—¿Recuerdas una cosa que me dijiste en agosto allá en el pueblo?

Ella pareció despistada pero nada turbada:

—Lo que recuerdo demasiado bien es que charlé por los codos.

—Me declaraste que lo sabías todo.

—Oh, sí… y también le dije lo mismo a Mitchy.

—Pues bien, mi querida señorita, no lo sabes todo.

—¿Debido a que no sé…?

—Sí: a que no sabes lo que me convierte *a mí* en víctima de su insaciable generosidad.

—Oh, bueno, si tú mismo lo sabes sin lugar a dudas, es todo lo que hace falta. Estoy muy *contenta* de enterarme de que hay algo que no sé —ahondó Nanda—. Y también estamos contentos de que vaya a presentarse Harold —reiteró.

—¿En calidad de beneficiario? ¡Entonces *estaremos* todos! Harold nos conferirá un toque de distinción.

—¿A que sí? No oigo hablar de otra cosa que de su popularidad. Mamá me escribió que todo el mundo está chiflado por él; y —dijo la muchacha pasado un instante— ¿sabes qué me escribió la prima Jane?

—¿Qué *puede* escribirte después de eso? Estoy intentando adivinarlo.

Nanda lo dispensó de tal esfuerzo:

—Caramba, que mamá ha desplazado sobre él todos los escrúpulos que sentía («llegando hasta el exceso»), en *mi* época, en lo relativo a aquello de lo cual estando con los del grupo podemos enteramos y que no resulte indicado para nosotros.

—¡Eso es todo un piropo *para mi*! —manifestó Vanderbank—. Y lo mejor es cuando hablas de tu antediluviana «época».

—Oh, está concluida para siempre.

—¿Qué es exactamente —demandó Vanderbank enseguida— lo que calificas de ese modo?

—Pues mi primera hora. Y el riesgo de que me enterase de algo.

—¿Ese riesgo no existe aquí?

Nanda pareció especular públicamente:

—No…, porque, realmente, Tishy, ¿no te das cuenta?, es espontánea. Charlamos con naturalidad.

Vanderbank mostró interés:

—¿Mientras que en casa de tu madre…?

—Vaya, todos estabais amedrentados.

Inmediatamente Vanderbank lanzó una carcajada:

—¿Te importa que le cuente eso a tu madre?

—Oh, ella ya lo sabe. A ella misma la he oído decir que lo estabais.

—Huy, *yo* lo estaba —convino—. Bien sabes que ya hemos hablado sobre eso.

—Ahora hablo de todos vosotros —dijo Nanda—. Pero mamá era quien lo estaba más, pues trataba (sé que lo hacía, ella me lo contó) de moderaros. Y cuando más moderados estabais era…

La diversión de Vanderbank recogió sus palabras:

—…¿cuando más nocivos resultábamos?

—Sí, porque, como es lógico, lo que se considera más tremebundamente inmencionable es justo lo que mejor captamos. Tishy es consciente de ello —observó Nanda maravillosamente.

Ya que en el semblante de Vanderbank cierto reflejo del tono femenino habría podido ser percibido por un espectador, con toda probabilidad fue percibido por su interlocutora, quien superficialmente, empero, no tenía por qué advertir allí —y de hecho no dejó entrever haber advertido nada más— otra cosa que unos correctos modales de esperar a que fuese la hora de la cena.

—Entonces lo mejor, ¿es sacarlo todo afuera sin tapujos? —preguntó él—. ¿Es lo que hace nuestra amiga que vive aquí?

—¡Oh, tú sabes lo que ella hace! —respondió la muchacha como con un súbito cese de su interés por la cuestión. Al punto se volvió debido a la apertura de la puerta.

Fue Tishy quien finalmente hizo su aparición, y su invitado la agasajó con un pronto recibimiento:

—Estábamos hablando de los delicados temas respecto de los cuales piensa usted que es mejor sacarlo todo afuera sin tapujos; pero me siento obligado a decir que haber invitado a cenar a un hombre hambriento no parece figurar entre ellos.

El signo distintivo de Tishy Grendon —como muchas veces había sido denominado en una alta sociedad donde la variedad de referencias ha llevado a una elevada perfección, en aras de una seguridad duradera, la conciencia de lo que es un signo distintivo— era una retardada iluminación facial que, respecto de cualquier asunto comentado, siempre iba a la zaga de la procesión. Lo cierto es que de ella se había dicho que, en cuanto las procesiones se desarrollaban a un ritmo mínimamente veloz, podía habitualmente hallársela, a causa de una concepción errónea de su propio puesto, embarullada en la siguiente; de tal guisa que ahora, por ejemplo, en el momento en que ella llegaba al punto de decirle a Vanderbank: «¿Está usted *realmente* hambriento?», hacía rato que Nanda ya había comenzado a acuciarlo para que cantara las alabanzas de la apariencia de su anfitriona. Por supuesto esto iba acompañado de benévolas miradas, de pies a cabeza, al atuendo de la misma:

—¿A que está espléndida? ¿Has visto en toda tu vida algo tan precioso?

—Estoy tan desmayado de inanición —contestó Van para la señora Grendon— que (lo mismo que el viajero por el desierto, ¿verdad?) tan sólo distingo, como un oasis o un espejismo, un bonito contorno borroso de verdor que hace frufrú. No me fío de usted.

—Yo no me fío *de ti* —dijo Nanda en nombre de su amiga—. Ella no es un «verdor»; los hombres son increíbles: no reconocen el más caro azul añejo que se ha visto jamás.

—¿Esto *es* tu «azul *añejo*»? —preguntó Vanderbank, monocular, muy seriamente—. Puedo imaginarme que sea «caro», pero yo habría jurado…

—…que era amarillo —lo acorrió Nanda— si no llego a informarte amablemente.

La figura de Tishy exhibió la serenidad típica de los objetos consagrados por su exposición pública; siendo en términos globales una admirable planta humana, habría hecho falta recurrir al postrer vendaval de noviembre para explicar la completud con que, en ciertos aspectos, se le habían caído las hojas. Sus compañeros no pudieron menos que poner de manifiesto mediante la orientación de sus miradas la índole de la responsabilidad con que los habría visto abrumados un espectador: la de elegir, a la hora de concentrar su atención, entre el efecto de que su anfitriona se hubiera vestido y el de que no se hubiera aliñado.

—Oh, estoy horrible; de sobra lo sé —dijo Tishy—. Lo único que estoy es limpia. Ahora bien, aquí tenemos a Nanda, que está guapísima —continuó con vaguedad—, aunque Nanda…

—¡Eh, querida, que Nanda está limpia también! —interrumpió la joven en cuestión; ante lo cual su compañero de visita no pudo menos que reírse con ella como por haberse librado de aquella antítesis cuyo acabamiento había sido evitado merced a la presencia de ánimo de la muchacha, por poco que, en general, estuviera involucrada de hecho, en la charla de la señora Grendon, tal figura de estilo.

—En lo tocante a semejante materia no hay nada como —observó Vanderbank cual si fuese lo mínimo que por decencia podía decir— recusar de inmediato cualquier imputación; y aquí tenemos a Harold, precisamente —continuó al siguiente instante—, tan limpio, impoluto y crujiente como un billete de cinco libras nuevo.

—¿Uno nuevo? —Harold ya había saludado a su anfitriona como un rayo—. Un hombre que, como es mi caso, no ha visto ninguno a lo largo de seis meses, se las apañaría perfectamente, os lo aseguro, con uno que haya perdido su como-queráis-llamarlo. —Con un amistoso mohín le dio a Nanda un beso no muy efusivo y luego, más consciente de su entorno, le prestó una atención más detenida a Tishy—: Hija mía, *tú* pareces haber perdido algo, aunque en tu favor diré que no se echa en falta.

La señora Grendon desplazó la mirada desde él hacia Nanda:

—¿Tu hermano quiere decir algo muy indecente? Yo sólo entiendo lo que dices cuando Nanda me lo explica —se volvió nuevamente hacia Harold—. De hecho, apenas hay algo que yo entienda sin que me lo explique Nanda. Es horrible que actualmente se marche afuera tanto tiempo con otras personas, por quienes estoy segura de que ni de lejos puede hacer tanto como por mí; eso ocasiona que yo la añore a todas horas. Y lo único con que me he topado que ella *no* es capaz de explicar —dejó caer Tishy abiertamente para su amiga— es qué diantres hace por allá ella misma.

—Caramba, está explotando al señor Longdon, como una buena muchacha fiel —dijo Harold—, como una buena hija fiel e incluso, aunque ella no me quiere ni la mitad de lo que yo la quiero *a ella*, estoy dispuesto a decir que como una buena hermana fiel. Me siento obligado a aclararte, mi querida Tishy —continuó—, que me parece endiabladamente afortunado, dado el rumbo de las costumbres, que cualquier jovencita realmente maja se retire de la circulación una temporada. Londres, palabra de honor, es de lo más inconveniente para las muchachas; y cualquier gran mansión campestre muy frecuentada es (con sus promiscuidades y oportunidades y todo eso) todavía peor, como muy bien sabéis por experiencia propia. *Yo* sé de ciertas residencias —declaró Harold— que, si yo tuviera hijas, antes les pegaba un tiro que mandarlas allá.

—¡Ah, sabes demasiadas cosas, mi querido muchacho! —observó Vanderbank con conmiseración.

—Oh, mi querido y galante Van —replicó el muchacho—, no hables como si *tú* conservaras ideales. Yo sé —prosiguió para las damas— exactamente dónde debieron de perecer ciertos ideales de Van, y en algunas de las residencias a que he aludido es exactamente donde Van ha dejado sus huellas. Actualmente un hombre ha de estar tenazmente aferrado a bonitas supersticiones para no *tener* que abrir los ojos. Nanda, cielo —concluyó benevolentemente—, sigue como hasta ahora. De modo que al menos por ti no tenga que abochornarme. Que hayas tenido la buena fortuna de alcanzar tu edad con tan escaso daño a tu inocencia te convierte en un caso atípico, cuyos privilegios hemos de concederte. Aunque Tishy no pueda decir cosa alguna capaz de asombrarte, eso no significa nada en tu contra: Tishy procede de una de las escasísimas

familias inglesas inocentes que aún quedan. Muy bien, podéis todos exclamar: «¡Ja!», pero estoy convencido de que sólo podríais citarme, digamos, cinco, o como mucho siete, familias en que no haya acontecido una que otra horripilancia. Por supuesto la nuestra es una, y la de Tishy es otra, y la de Van otra más, y la del señor Longdon la última, y con esto os salen, así son las cosas, cuatro. ¡Conque ahí lo tenéis! —remató Harold alegremente.

—¡Ya entiendo por qué está tan de moda tu hermano! —comentó Vanderbank para Nanda.

Mas la señora Grendon le expresó a su adolescente amigo una retardada curiosidad:

—¿Quieres decir que estás a favor de la adopción…?

—¡Por Dios, Tishy! —protestó Nanda en voz baja.

No obstante, Harold tenía nociones propias en materia de discreción:

—¿Que el buen hombre se quede con Nanda? No enteramente sin reticencias. Yo estoy de acuerdo con el jefe: creo que deberíamos *obtener* algo. «Muy bien, buen hombre, pero ¿qué nos *da* usted a cambio de ella?»: eso es lo que *yo* le diría. Me refiero, ya sabéis, a que me parece que Nanda no está haciendo todo el negocio que podría. Si él me quisiera *a mí* no digo que no conseguiría quedarse conmigo, pero yo consideraría un deber de conciencia hacer que ello representase algún que otro beneficio para mis padres. *Eres* maja, moza —se volvió hacia su hermana—, y uno todavía puede sentir, hacia la flor de tu juventud, algo de la maravillosa «veneración» en que nos educaron a todos. Por el amor de Dios, entonces (y tanto más por ello), no cierres filas con él del todo hasta que tú y yo hayamos intercambiado una o dos palabras más. ¡Que me ahorquen —tomó a dirigirse a toda la concurrencia— si tolero que él la consiga a cambio de nada!

—Vea usted más bien —le dijo Vanderbank a la señora Grendon— cómo hay tan pocas trazas de que vaya usted a perderla, que esta noche Nanda ha sido capaz de traerle aquí al buen hombre. A este paso no es que la perdamos: sencillamente también lo adquirimos a él.

—Ah, pero ¿es exactamente la *compañía* del buen hombre lo que ansiamos? —y Harold semejó afanoso y penetrante—. ¡Si ése es el mejor provecho que Nanda es capaz de obtener…!

—Como él nos oiga charlar de esta manera, que a mí me parece estrictamente criminal —intervino Nanda con gran llaneza y seriedad—, no creo probable que obtengamos nada.

—Oh, la charla de Harold —protestó Vanderbank— posee, pienso, un extraordinario interés; sólo que me siento obligado a decir que me deja chafado. Tengo que hacer cuando menos, mientras lo escucho, un gran esfuerzo para dar la talla. Me parece que hasta hace no mucho tiempo —prosiguió para su joven amigo— solía sentirme perfectamente integrado en cualquier charla; ¡pero el modo en que vosotros, desdichados jovenzuelos, me hacéis caer en la cuenta de que ya *no* lo estoy…!

Harold pareció sinceramente deseoso de asimilar aquello:

—Las generaciones rebeldes te aplastan a su paso; ¿es eso?

Con la cabeza Vanderbank ejecutó dulcemente un ademán trágico:

—Hablamos lenguajes diferentes.

—¡Ah, pero me parece que yo entiendo perfectamente el tuyo!

—Ésa es precisamente mi angustia… y tu ventaja. Es rematadamente curioso —prosiguió Vanderbank para Nanda—, pero el hecho es que creo que debo de ser para tu hermano, ¿sabes?, casi lo mismo que el señor Longdon es para mí. Por unas razones o por otras el señor Longdon no acaba de calarme. Sin embargo yo, me parece, sí lo calo a él. ¡Pero nosotros estamos desfasados!

—¿«Nosotros»? —hizo de eco Nanda, con la mirada fija en él.

—El señor Longdon y yo. Es algo que no puede evitarse, supongo —prosiguió, para Tishy, con cordial tristeza—, pero la vida *es* rápida.

La señora Grendon, que obviamente era crédula, pareció decididamente aterrada:

—¡Oh, pero, querido mío, no me incluya! Yo aún no he comenzado a *vivir*.

—Pues *yo* sí: ahí está el quid precisamente —dijo Harold—. Gracias, con tanto mayor motivo, querido Van, por tu información.

En este preciso instante se produjo un anuncio desde la puerta y Tishy se volvió para recibir a la duquesa, con Harold, casi mal si fuera señor de la casa, siguiéndola poco menos que pegado a sus talones.

—Olvídate de *ella* —le dijo Vanderbank inmediatamente a la compañera con quien lo dejaron solo— y dime, mientras aún te tengo a mi disposición, quién ha escrito mi nombre sobre la novela francesa que hace unos minutos vi en la otra habitación.

Al principio Nanda se limitó a sorprenderse:

—Si esa novela está allí… ¿no habrás sido *tú*?

Él titubeó un instante, y replicó:

—Si esa novela estuviera aquí, comprobarías que no es mi letra.

Nanda vaciló, durante un lapso más prolongado; por fin dijo:

—¿Cómo iba a comprobarlo? ¿Yo qué sé sobre tu letra?

Él la miró intensamente:

—Quia, tú *has* visto mi letra.

—¡Huy, en tan pocas ocasiones! —replicó ella con una tenue sonrisa.

—¿Te refieres a que no te he escrito durante mucho tiempo? Pero si te escribí en… ¿cuándo fue?

—Eso digo yo: ¿cuándo? Pero ¿por qué *tendrías* que escribirme? —preguntó en un tono completamente dispar.

Ante esto él no se sintió provisto de una respuesta adecuada, y lo que tras un momento acabó declarando tuvo, dadas las circunstancias, algo del sabor de lo improcedente:

—Lo singular *de ti* es que eres demasiado buena; lo cual, por lo que a mí respecta, no es sino otra forma de decir que eres demasiado comprensiva. No exiges nada. Dejas correr las cosas. No propicias excesivamente esa debilidad humana que disfruta con un ocasional atisbo de las debilidades ajenas.

Ella le había prestado una honda atención:

—¿Acaso quieres decir que servidora no deja ver suficientemente sus anhelos?

—Creo que se trata de eso. Eres tan diabólicamente orgullosa.

De nuevo ella pareció sorprenderse:

—No tantísimo, en cualquier caso: sólo lo suficiente para requerir *de ti*…

—Sí, ¿el qué?

—Caramba, cosas agradables para ti mismo —dijo ella con sencillez.

—¡Oh, querida, eso no es una felicísima noticia! —declaró—. Entonces, ¿cómo es que, con lo escueto de nuestra correspondencia —dijo a continuación—, yo reconozco tan bien *tu* letra?

Mientras tanto se había producido una serie de anuncios, correspondientes a igual número de llegadas de invitados, y en este momento la mirada de Nanda se concentró en su madre y el señor Longdon, que entraron juntos en la habitación. Cuando Nanda volvió a mirar a su compañero ya había transcurrido un lapso suficiente para haberse olvidado de la pregunta de éste.

—Si soy orgullosa, según tú, no soy buena —dijo—; y si soy buena (siempre según tú) no soy orgullosa. En todo caso yo sé muy bien cuán enormemente ocupado sueles estar, qué cantidad de trabajo tienes que hacer y cómo cada minuto, para ti, cuenta. No me conviertas en un delito el hecho de que yo sea razonable.

—No, eso demostraría, ¿verdad?, que no hay para tanto. ¡Pero de qué manera todo esto remite…!

—Sí, ¿a qué? —preguntó ella.

—A la vieja historia. Sabes cómo estoy ocupado. Sabes cuánto trabajo. Sabes de qué tiempo dispongo.

—Ah, entiendo —dijo Nanda—. *Es*, a fin de cuentas, que yo lo sé todo.

—Todo. El libro que he mencionado es uno que, hace meses (ahora me acuerdo), le presté a tu madre.

—Ah, ¿una obra con un forro azul? Ahora me acuerdo yo también. —La faz de Nanda se iluminó—. Se me había olvidado que andaba por aquí, pero debí de traerla yo (de hecho, recuerdo que la traje) para Tishy. Y debí de escribir tu nombre sobre ella para que no nos olvidáramos…

—…¿de que yo no os la había prestado a ninguna de vosotras? ¿No se te pasó por la cabeza escribir tu propio nombre? —ahondó Vanderbank.

—Pero ¿y si no es mi letra? *No* es la mía, estoy segura.

—Por consiguiente, asimismo, si no puede ser la de Tishy…

—Es bastante sencillo: es la de mamá.

—¿«Sencillo»? —preguntó Vanderbank riéndose—. ¡Ésta sí que es buena! Y ¿puedo preguntar si has leído la singular obra?

—Oh, sí. —Después ella dijo maravillosamente—: Por Tishy.

—¿Para comprobar si era adecuada para ella?

—He hecho eso con bastante frecuencia —repuso la muchacha.

—Y ella, ¿acepta tus dictámenes?

—Generalmente sí. Creo recordar que esta vez lo hizo.

—¿Y leyó la maldita obra?

—¡Oh, no! —dijo Nanda.

Él la miró un instante más.

—¡Eres extremadamente rigurosa! —espetó algo excéntricamente, dándose luego la vuelta para ir a saludar al señor Longdon.

XXVIII

Cuando tras la cena la concurrencia fue restituida a las habitaciones del primer piso, la duquesa se puso de pie tan pronto como se abrió la puerta para que hicieran su entrada los caballeros. Entonces habría podido advertirse que albergaba un propósito, pues tan pronto como los integrantes comenzaron, con la debida dosis de las habituales vacilaciones y malemparejamientos, a mezclarse otra vez, ella pareció ser la primera en haber tomado su decisión. Se apoderó del señor Longdon y lo sentó a su vera en un sofá con capacidad exacta para dos personas.

—Lo he capturado a usted sin escrúpulos —dijo con franqueza— pues hay cosas que quiero decirle y también preguntarle muy privadamente. Como es natural, lo primero de todo quiero darle las gracias de nuevo.

Ningún derrumbe del señor Longdon era nunca incompatible con que este caballero se sentase muy estirado hacia adelante:

—¿«De nuevo»?

—¿Parece usted tan perplejo —requirió ella— porque de veras se había olvidado de la gratitud que le expresé cuando tuvo la bondad de traer a Nanda a Londres para la boda de Aggie… o porque no lo considera un asunto sobre el cual yo haya de molestarme en volver? ¿Cómo puedo evitarlo —prosiguió sin aguardar una respuesta—, si veo la mano de usted en todo lo que ha sucedido desde aquella charla tan interesante que en Mertle sostuve con usted el pasado verano? Ha habido veces que a buen seguro he pensado en escribirle; incluso se me ocurrió la desafortunada idea audaz de proponerle que me dejara ir a visitarlo un domingo. Entonces la crisis, mi momentánea alarma, se me antojó a punto de estallar, conque me pareció que yo podría postergarlo hasta alguna oportunidad como ésta, que habría de llegar tarde o temprano. —No obstante, hasta tal punto semejó su compañero dejar dicha oportunidad en manos de ella, que ella no pudo menos que aprovechar apresuradamente, para cubrir la desnudez de la misma, la hermosa presuposición que se le puso más a tiro—: Observo que inteligentemente usted adivina que lo que me ha tenido en vilo es el efecto sobre la señora Brook de la pérdida de su querido Mitchy. Si de todas formas usted no ha recibido ninguna impresión de tal efecto, ¿no se deberá únicamente a que en estos últimos meses ha visto a la señora Brook con tan escasa frecuencia? *Yo* la he visto —dijo la duquesa— bastante y de sobra. —Ella aguardó como para que dicha visión, tras esto, produjera alguna impresión discernible, mas la única consecuencia de su discurso fue que su amigo miró intensamente hacia alguna otra persona. Acaso fue precisamente este síntoma lo que a ella le bastó, pues al cabo de un instante ya estaba otra vez en la brecha—: Hasta tal extremo las cosas han salido tal como *yo* deseaba, que me sentiría una verdadera impía si no mostrase humildad de corazón. De hecho hay un aspecto —agregó con aristocrática devoción— respecto del cual no tengo miedo de decir en mi favor que no pasa un día ni una noche sin que la muestre. No obstante, a ustedes los ingleses, lo sé, no les agrada que uno hable de su religión. Pero sencillamente yo me siento tan agradecida por la mía (quiero decir, con tan escaso sentimiento de impureza o tortura a causa de ella) como por mi salud o mi carruaje. En todo caso lo importante es que digo sin ningún cruel espíritu de triunfo, mas pese a ello lo digo con prístina claridad, que ahora tal vez sea temible la disgustada valedora del señor Mitchett. —Estas palabras poseyeron la entonación de un clímax, y ella las había espetado como para, una vez cumplido el deber, dejarlas flotando en el aire; pero tras un instante algo que tuvo lugar, a su ver, en el rostro que el señor Longdon mantenía parcialmente desviado, la dotó de lo que él habría podido denominar un segundo aliento—: Oh, ya sé que usted piensa que ella lo *ha* sido siempre. Pero usted ha estado exagerando… en cuanto a eso; e incluso en este momento no digo que ello no sea algo que en el fondo vaya a beneficiamos. Sólo que debemos obrar con cautela. Hemos de recordar que desde su propio punto de vista ella ha sufrido un agravio pero hemos de conducimos como si por lo menos tuviéramos confianza en ella. Esto último, ya sabe, es lo que usted nunca ha tenido en modo alguno.

El señor Longdon emitió un murmullo de incomodidad que lo hizo cambiar de postura, y la secuela de dicho cambio fue que seguidamente aceptó de su almohadillado ángulo del sofá el completo apoyo que éste podía brindarle. Aparte, aun cuando sus ojos no habían encarado los de su compañera, habían sido llevados, mediante la mano que repetida y algo dolorosamente él se había pasado ante los mismos, a examinar la cuestión de cuál de las extrañas materias presentadas a su elección le costaría menos trabajo aparentar tratar abiertamente. Con lo que él ya había tenido que pagar, según habría inferido fácilmente un espectador a partir del prolongado estremecimiento reprimido que finalmente lo había impelido a recostarse, era con cierto sacrificio de su costumbre de no deplorar privadamente a aquellos con quienes se mostraba públicamente amable. Fue manifiesto, empero, que cuando enseguida habló, su pensamiento había avanzado un trecho:

—Puedo asegurar que he procurado al máximo cumplir con las leyes del decoro. Pero no creo que el señor Vanderbank ame a la valedora del señor Mitchett.

Esto encendió una instantánea luz en la duquesa:

—*Vous avez bien de l'esprit*. Usted hace que servidora se sienta cómoda. He estado dando prudentes rodeos, mientras que usted ya estaba en el meollo. En realidad él sólo ama a Nanda.

—Sí… en realidad.

La duquesa vaciló:

—Y, sin embargo, ¿cuánto exactamente?

—No lo he interrogado.

Ella hizo otra pausa, aunque más breve; y dijo:

—¿No cree que ya va siendo hora de que usted lo *haga*? —Una vez más ella esperó, después pareció pensar que la que no podía esperar era su oportunidad—: Hemos colaborado en cierta medida, pero usted no tiene confianza en mí. Seguro que no cree que yo sea sincera del todo. ¿De veras no se da cuenta de que *debo* serlo? —En ella hubo un tono de súplica que por fin lo hizo atalayarla—. ¿No se da cuenta —siguió, aprovechando esa ventaja— de que, habiendo yo logrado todo lo que deseo, carezco de cualquier motivo concebible para aguarles la fiesta a los demás? No deseo en lo más mínimo, se lo aseguro, aguársela siquiera a la señora Brook; pues ¿cómo iba a verse un ápice más alejada de él (de lo que ya lo está, quiero decir) si *se produjese* lo que usted desea? Honradamente, mi querido amigo, ello es lo mismo que deseo yo, y lo único que anhelo, por lo demás, es ayudarlo. Lo que siento por Nanda, créame, es pura compasión. No diré que me siento locamente agradecida hacia ella, pues a la larga (de un modo u otro) ella sacará su propio beneficio. Mas no por ello dejo de preocuparme cuando la contemplo, y tanto más a causa de esta mismísima certidumbre, que tan amablemente acaba usted de inculcarme, de que con la madre de Nanda nuestro joven realmente no ha…

Cualquiera que fuese la certidumbre que el señor Longdon había inculcado amablemente, fue a cuenta de otro punto por lo que en este momento intervino:

—¿Es que también es *su* joven?

No se sintió demasiado divertida como para abstenerse de mirar en su derredor:

—¿Acaso semejantes ornamentos gloriosos de la vida no son un poco propiedad de todos los que los admiramos y disfrutamos?

—¿Usted lo «disfruta» a él? —preguntó el señor Longdon de idéntica forma sencilla y directa.

—Inmensamente.

Durante un breve lapso el silencio masculino pareció ser indicio de alguna estrategia.

—¿Qué es lo que nuestro joven no ha hecho con la señora Brook? —inquirió él.

—Pues aquello que *sería* una contrariedad. No ha rebasado cierto punto. Usted puede preguntar cómo es que una sabe tales cosas, pero mucho me temo que carezco de pruebas tangibles. Una mujer sabe, pero no puede explicar. Ellos dos no han hecho, como suele decirse, nada incorrecto.

El señor Longdon puso mala cara:

—Sería extremadamente horrendo que sí lo hubieran hecho.

—¡Oh, pero, para usted y yo que conocemos la vida, no es *eso* lo que (si ello se hubiese visto propiciado por otras cosas) habría podido refrenarlos! Da la casualidad, no obstante, de que nos hemos librado limpiamente. ¡A él ella no le dice…!

Ella tenía locuciones que él no podía menos que investigar:

—¿No le «dice»…?

—Caramba, pues tantísimo como a ella le habría gustado poder creer.

—En tal caso, ¿dónde está el peligro contra el cual parece usted desear prevenirme?

—Exactamente en que en estas circunstancias ella sienta lo que sentiría la mayoría de las mujeres. Hizo

lo que pudo por su hija, como ya ve usted. Hizo, me siento obligada a decirlo, teniendo en cuenta cómo funcionan esas cosas entre ustedes los del grupo, muchísimos esfuerzos. Cuidó como un tesoro y cubrió de mimos a Mitchy, a quien asimismo, aunque por supuesto no hasta tal grado, habría querido para sí sola. Con una simple palabra Nanda habría podido retenerlo, volviéndose así bastante menos accesible al plan *de usted*. Eso habría complacido absolutamente a su madre, pero las hijitas inglesas de ustedes, en estos tiempos revueltos (¡oh, ya sé cómo usted los siente!), no paran en semejantes menudencias; y (aunque a usted le parezca extraño por mi parte) no puedo librarme, aun cuando me haya beneficiado tan directamente, de una cierta compasión también hacia el disgusto de la señora Brook. En resumidas cuentas, como mujer bien nacida que soy me apenan ambas; desde todo punto de vista lamento lo que a fin de cuentas es un parentesco más bien desdichado. Sólo que, como le cuento, naturalmente me digo a mí misma que Nanda es la única por quien ahora debo preocuparme seriamente… si es que no estoy dando excesivamente por sentado, es decir, que a usted no lo molesta mi desparpajo.

Con una simple bajada de ojos el señor Longdon dejó de lado el problema de sus propias molestias; así de claro resultaba que para él había una cuestión más relevante.

—¿Qué sabe usted de mi «plan»? —inquirió.

—Caramba, mi querido amigo, ¿acaso no le he dicho que desde lo de Mertle he discernido en todas partes la intervención de su mano? Para los ajenos, ¿qué diantres parecen sus movimientos sino una adopción?

—¿De… er… *él*?

—Es usted delicioso. ¡De… er… *ella*! Si para usted viene a ser lo mismo, tanto mejor. En cualquier caso es así como todos los interpretamos, con la propia señora Brook *en tête*. Ella ve (merced a la generosidad de usted) solucionada, más o menos, en el peor de los casos, la vida de Nanda; y precisamente eso es lo que la llena de buena conciencia.

Aunque el señor Longdon respiró profundamente, al menos ello pareció mostrar que no se desinteresaba.

—¿Para qué quiere ella una buena conciencia? —inquirió.

Durante un instante la duquesa casi lo miró condescendientemente desde debajo de su elevada diadema:

—¡Caray, usted la odia de veras!

Él se sonrojó, pero no cedió terreno:

—¿No me dice usted misma que es temible?

—Sí, y hay que vigilarla. Pero (a ser posible) con buen humor.

—¿Buen humor? —El señor Longdon se quedó levemente boquiabierto.

—Obsérvela ahora —continuó su amiga con una indicación que resultó bien fácil de seguir. Separada de ellos por toda la anchura de la habitación, la señora Brook estaba, aunque colocada de perfil, plenamente visible; la satisfacción con que estaba recién sentada en una fina silla dorada semejaba sólo aparente y por ende era manifiesto que no se veía ratificada por la circunstancia de que la elevada cabeza de Vanderbank, inmóvil ante ella en contemplación global de las oportunidades presentes, obligaba a los ojos femeninos, durante su charla, a una posición alzada digna de una plegaria. Los demás invitados estaban dispersos, algunos en la habitación contigua, y para los ocupantes del sofá de la duquesa aquellos dos constituían, en calidad de pareja conversante, todo un cuadro, enmarcado y aislado, imprecisamente duplicado en el maravilloso encerado del suelo francés—. Ella *es* enormemente atractiva. —La duquesa pareció dejar caer esto a guisa de petición de indulgencia y ser verdaderamente impelida a desarrollarlo más a fondo por culpa del silencio de su interlocutor—: Nunca en mi vida me ha dado la impresión, ¿sabe?, de que Nanda le llegue a la señora Brook a la altura del zapato.

El señor Longdon dudó:

—¿Quiere decir en cuanto a belleza?

Pese a la simplicidad de él, su amiga hizo distingos:

—Oh, ninguna de ellas tiene «belleza». No es una palabra de la cual pueda hacerse un uso tan desenvuelto. Pero la madre tiene donosura.

—¿Y la hija no?

—Ni un rasgo. Por supuesto cuando digo *eso* usted me contradirá, pensando en su adorada Lady Julia, y querrá saber qué hay entonces de la venturosa similitud. Le concedo de buena gana que Lady Julia debió tener el elemento de que estamos hablando. Pero ese querido, dulce y bendito elemento es un secreto perdido en la misma medida que el querido, dulce y bendito *otro* elemento que se esfumó al mismo tiempo: la decente vida ociosa a cuyo ocaso, en términos generales, también hemos asistido ya. En todo caso se trata del elemento del cual se han deshecho más eficazmente la pobre Nanda y todas las de su clase. Oh, si usted confiara un poco más en mí, comprobaría que opino al unísono con usted respecto de todas las cosas que

han cambiado para peor. Me muestro liviana, pero tengo la suficiente edad para haber visto. Así y todo, en la señora Brook pervive cierto hechizo (diga usted lo que quiera) cuando inclina esa cabecita castaña. *Dieu sait comme elle se coiffe*, ¡pero hay que ver el partido que le saca a eso! Basta con que mire usted.

De una manera indescriptible el señor Longdon dio a entender haberse retirado a una gran distancia; pero aun desde esa posición debió de lanzar una mirada que se salió por la tangente:

—Ambos saben que usted está observándolos.

—¿Y no saben que está observándolos *usted*? ¡El pobre señor Van es la mar de consciente!

—También lo sería yo si dos terribles mujeres…

—…¿estuviesen admirándolo a usted a la par? —La duquesa cerró el gran abanico de plumas que parcialmente los había resguardado—. Bueno, *ella*, pobrecita, no puede remediarlo. Lo quiere a él para ella sola.

Ante la bajada del abanico de la duquesa él se colocó los quevedos:

—¡Pero él no la quiere (para nada) *a ella*!

—Helo ahí. Ella apostó su dinero, valga la expresión, sin recompensa. Ha tenido que ceder a Mitchy y no ha recibido nada a cambio.

Hubo delicadeza, y no obstante hubo contundencia, en la objeción del señor Longdon:

—Según usted, ¿*yo* no soy nada?

Ante esto literalmente la duquesa se henchió con una alegre mirada fija:

—¿Así que *es* una adopción? —Ella se abstuvo de presionar, empero; se limitó a seguir adelante—: No es cuestión, mi querido amigo, de cómo lo llame *yo*. Usted no seduce a la señora Brook.

—Cielos —dijo el señor Longdon—, ¿qué demonios desea ella?

—¿Que pueda ser más seductor, quiere usted decir, que la famosa «devoción» de usted? ¡Ah, *caro mio*, desea algo más palpable! Pero lo escandalizo —agregó rápidamente su compañera.

No puede decirse que constituyera un mentís la manera en que él se incorporó con decisión; y sin embargo se quedó allí inmóvil por unos instantes y preguntó:

—¿Qué puede hacer ella en definitiva?

—Puede *detener* al señor Van.

El señor Longdon se maravilló:

—¿Dónde?

—Quiero decir hasta que sea demasiado tarde. Ella puede manejarlo.

—Pero ¿cómo?

Disimuladamente otra vez la duquesa se había fijado en el efecto que los patentes movimientos de su anciano amigo habían producido sobre la señora Brook, quien asimismo se puso de pie. Con el abanico aquélla dio un golpecito en la pierna del señor Longdon:

—Siéntese y ya verá.

XXIX

Él la obedeció maquinalmente, si bien dio la casualidad de que ello le prestó el aire de haber interpretado la aproximación de la señora Brook como una indicación para que volviera a tomar asiento. Esta última se llegó hasta ellos, Vanderbank la siguió, y fue sin haberse movido nuevamente —alzando la mirada levemente boquiabierto, de hecho, desde su sitio— como el señor Longdon acogió, mientras ella se erguía ante él, un requerimiento de una índole capaz de iluminar lo que acababa de decir la duquesa.

—¿Por qué me odia usted tanto?

Vanderbank, que, al lado de la señora Brook, lo miró con atención, muy bien pudo barruntar que el anciano se había puesto algo pálido; si bien ni siquiera Vanderbank, quien tenía razones particulares para observar las más diminutas sutilezas, habría atinado a percibir en el hecho la sombría visión privada que lo habría explicado: la llamarada de temor ante cómo iba por fin a revelarse asaz extraña y disímilmente, fuese como hija o como madre, la señora Brook.

—Es mi deber advertirle, señor —sugirió el joven—, que los del grupo consideramos eso (en Buckingham Crescent indudablemente) una pregunta capciosa. No es jugar limpio: es un golpe bajo. Nosotros odiamos y amamos (en especial lo segundo), pero revelamos mutuamente el porqué es infringir esa pequeña regla tácita de enteramos por nuestra cuenta que es la amenidad de nuestras vidas y el origen de nuestros triunfos. Puede usted contestar, eso sí, si le apetece, pero no está obligado.

El señor Longdon le aplicó a él algo de ese mismo escrutinio impersonal, manifiestamente mirándolo con mayor intensidad que nunca y sin duda hallando asimismo en sus ojos una conciencia más saturada. A renglón seguido se levantó, pero, sin responderle a Vanderbank, tomó a atalayar a la señora Brook, de la cual se hizo eco con inexpresividad:

—¿Odiarte?

Al siguiente instante, mientras él seguía de pie lo mismo que Vanderbank, la señora Brook ya estaba aclarándole el significado desde la esquina almohadillada que él mismo acababa de abandonar:

—Caramba, cuando usted regresa a la capital, se viene directamente, por así decirlo, aquí.

—Huy, ¿qué es eso —preguntó la duquesa a beneficio de él— sino mantenerse bien pegado a Nanda o en todo caso llevarse bien con ella?

Empero la señora Brook no tuvo oídos para aquel alegato:

—¡Y cuando yo, acudiendo aquí también y pensando sólo en mi oportunidad de «encontrarme» con usted, hago maravillas para captar su atención, usted está totalmente entregado…!

—…¡a intentar, como es lógico —atajó de nuevo la duquesa—, llevarse bien *conmigo*!

Ahora la señora Brook tuvo una sonrisa para ella:

—Ah, pues entonces eso exige precauciones que a lo mejor *yo* incumplo si interrumpo demasiado vuestra charla.

—¿A que se muestra de lo más simpática conmigo —le preguntó la duquesa al señor Longdon— cuando lo que yo estaba haciendo era ponerla por las nubes?

La respuesta de su interlocutor no fue lo bastante rápida para anticiparse a la de la propia señora Brook:

—Mi querida Jane, eso sólo demuestra que el señor Longdon había llegado hasta algún extremo en la dirección opuesta que por simple decencia tú debías contrapesar. Probablemente la verdad se halla en el «término medio» (¿no es así como se lo denomina?) entre vosotros dos. Ahora no te lleves *tú* al señor Longdon —siguió para Vanderbank, quien había escudriñado en derredor a la búsqueda de algún mejor acomodo.

Inmediatamente Vanderbank arrimó la silla más próxima, la cual fortuitamente estaba del lado que la duquesa ocupaba en el sofá, y dijo:

—¿Quiere sentarse aquí, señor?

—Si usted se queda para protegerme.

—A decir verdad es para eso para lo que se lo he traído hasta aquí a usted —dijo la señora Brook mientras el señor Longdon ocupaba el asiento y Vanderbank partía a buscar otra silla—. Pero no sabía —comentó con su suave curiosidad desprejuiciada— que él lo llamase «señor». —Muchas veces ella hacía descubrimientos regocijadamente infantiles—. Lo ha hecho dos veces.

—¿No es eso únicamente vuestro inevitable asombro inglés —requirió la duquesa— ante la amabilidad más común y corriente en otras sociedades?… ¡de suerte que una se viene aquí para hallarla considerada, en cuestión de etiqueta, el no va más!

—Oh —observó el señor Longdon—, es un tratamiento de cortesía que a mí mismo también me gusta mucho aplicarles a los demás.

—Aquí yo siempre pregunto —siguió la duquesa para él— qué palabra suele usarse en vez de ésa. Y ¿sabe lo que me contestan?

La señora Brook recapacitó; enseguida nuevamente, antes de que pudiera hablar él, sugirió con gran encanto:

—¿Nuestras galantes maneras? —Rápidamente preguntó asimismo al señor Longdon—: ¿Es *eso* lo que usted echa de menos en mí?

Sin embargo él recapacitó más que la señora Brook:

—¿Vuestras «galantes maneras»?

—Caramba, esas antiguas y espléndidas ceremoniosidades en las que la duquesa es tan maestra. —Tras esto la señora Brook tuvo una de sus visiones más ansiosas—: ¿A usted mamá lo llamaba «señor»? ¿Debería hacerlo *yo*? ¿Realmente consigue usted que, en privado, lo haga Nanda? *Ella* es de tan exagerada discreción —explicó para la duquesa y para Vanderbank, quien había regresado con su silla— que se trata justamente del tipo de detalle ilustrativo que por nada del mundo me revelaría.

El señor Longdon se estiró para hablarle a Van, situado ahora, tras haber estado unos momentos de charla con Tishy a la vista de todos ellos, junto al brazo del sofá correspondiente a la señora Brook:

—Usted no me ha protegido… sino que me ha abandonado a la intemperie.

—Oh, no hay diversión sin riesgo… —recogió con brío sus palabras la señora Brook—. Tal vez incluso debería decirse que no hay riesgo sin diversión.

La mirada de Vanderbank había seguido a la señora Grendon tras su breve coloquio con ésta, finiquitado por alguna solicitación de la desanimada presencia de la anfitriona en el extremo opuesto de la estancia.

—¿Qué dirías entonces, siguiendo esa teoría —inquirió el joven—, de la extraordinaria lobreguez de nuestra anfitriona? Su ausencia de peligro, por regla de tres, debe ser descomunal.

Esta vez la duquesa fue la primera en comprender de qué se hablaba:

—Precisamente la expresión del semblante de Tishy proviene de que nosotros la hayamos comparado tan desfavorablemente con su pobre hermana Carrie, quien, aunque esta noche no haya venido aquí junto con los Cashmore (¡si bien ya es bastante pasmosa incluso *sin* eso!), con gran frecuencia nos ha demostrado que al fin y al cabo una *âme en peine*, constantemente flaqueando pero, según nos asevera Nanda, generalmente remontándose, puede ofrecer una pinta tan beatífica como una muñeca holandesa.

Mientras Tishy se desplazaba, la mirada de la señora Brook había descrito la misma trayectoria que la de Vanderbank, a quien, por lo demás, visiblemente ella no había dejado de observar mientras la pareja había estado charlando.

—Puedes opinar lo que quieras sobre Carrie, como bien sabes —repuso la señora Brook—, y lo mismo digo sobre el señor Cashmore; pero esta noche estoy rendida de admiración, como siempre lo he estado, ante el modo en que Tishy saca provecho de su propia fealdad. Yo lo denominaría, si la palabra no estuviese tan ligada a las sirvientas, la mayor «vistosidad» que he contemplado nunca.

—Hija mía —objetó la duquesa—, lo que tú calificas como sacar provecho de su propia fealdad es lo que yo calificaría como no esconder nada de su propia belleza. Sin duda, «vistosidad» es adecuadísima aplicada a Tishy, excepto que en su acepción vulgar se refiere más bien a un encanto artificial que a un estado de pura naturaleza. La vistosidad debería tener su base en el atuendo. Pero Nanda más bien arrincona a Tishy.

Quizá más meditabunda de lo habitual, la señora Brook introdujo una leve matización:

—Le *deja*, aun así, algo de espacio. Hablaré con ella.

—¿Con Tishy? —preguntó Vanderbank.

—Huy, *eso* no conduciría a nada positivo. Con Nanda. Así y todo —continuó ella—, resulta rematadamente superficial por tu parte no darte cuenta de que su melancolía (sobre la cual además yo ya te había llamado la atención hace un rato) es un mero accidente facial y no se corresponde ni, como suele decirse, «rima» con nada que haya dentro de ella y que pueda volverla un poco interesante. Por lo que me

gusta su melancolía es precisamente porque resulta tan grotesca en sí misma. Su decaimiento es ni más ni menos que sus rasgos. Su lobreguez, como dices tú, es simplemente su nariz rota.

—¿La señora Grendon *tiene* rota la nariz? —demandó el señor Longdon con una entonación que por algún motivo despertó en los otros el espíritu de la hilaridad.

—¿Nunca lo ha mencionado Nanda? —inquirió la señora Brook con este jolgorio.

—Eso es la discreción de que hablabas hace un momento —dijo la duquesa—. Sólo que yo más bien habría esperado que resultara cómico el efecto de la causa a que aludes.

—La nariz rota de la señora Grendon, señor —explicó Vanderbank para el señor Longdon—, es tan sólo la gentil manera que estas damas tienen de referirse al corazón roto de la señora Grendon. Usted debe de saberlo todo sobre eso.

—Oh sí… *todo*. —El señor Longdon habló con gran llaneza, esta vez con el resultado, por parte de sus acompañantes, de un silencio de varios minutos, que al final él mismo hubo de romper—: El señor Grendon no la ama. —Al parecer la adición de estas palabras representó una diferencia… cual si constituyesen un renovado vínculo con la irresistible comedia de las cosas. Que el señor Longdon fuera inesperadamente hilarante no fue, empero, óbice para que manifestara sus ideas con plenitud—: Para dos hermanas es muy lamentable ser ambas, en sus respectivos matrimonios, tan desgraciadas.

—Oh, pero Tishy, lo afirmo —replicó la señora Brook—, *no* es nada desgraciada. Si yo estuviese convencida de que realmente lo es, nunca dejaría que Nanda acudiese a verla.

—Ésa es la más extravagante doctrina, cielo —intervino la duquesa—. Cuando estás convencida de que «realmente» una mujer es pobre, ¿nunca le das un mendrugo?

—¿Llama usted un mendrugo a Nanda, duquesa? —preguntó divertido Vanderbank.

—De cualquier manera Nanda es todo lo que, por lo visto, en la actualidad, la pobre Tishy tiene para seguir viviendo.

—En tal caso se muestra usted crítica —dijo el joven— con nuestra cena de esta noche.

—Huy —manifestó la señora Brook—, Jane jamás se muestra crítica: tan sólo irreprimiblemente ingeniosa. Por otra parte, es únicamente Tishy quien propala que su marido no le tiene afecto. *Él*, pobre hombre, no dice nada semejante.

—Sí, pero, pensándolo bien, ¿tienes alguna idea —le planteó Vanderbank sin tardanza— de dónde demonios, todo este tiempo, *está* su marido?

—Dios no permita —comentó la duquesa— que indaguemos demasiado indiscretamente.

—Así se habla; bien dicho —apostilló el señor Longdon.

Una vez más él accionó el resorte de la hilaridad, si bien no hasta el punto de menoscabar la subsiguiente aseveración de la duquesa:

—Es Nanda, ya lo sabes, quien habla, y en voz bien alta, de los desafectos de Harry Grendon.

—Eso le es fácil —declaró la señora Brook— habida cuenta de que ella misma no es uno de ellos.

—No hay duda de que Nanda no es uno de los desafectos de nadie —observó con gravedad el señor Longdon.

La señora Brook se estiró para mirarlo atentamente:

—¡Usted *es* un cielo! Pero, aun así, tengo que echarle una bronca a propósito de algo.

El señor Longdon devolvió aquella mirada, pero en cierta forma se la devolvió a Van:

—Me siento asustado hasta el punto de no poder pensar en nada.

—¿Soy *yo* quien lo asusta? —dijo Vanderbank.

El señor Longdon titubeó inmediatamente.

—Sí —respondió.

—Debe de tratarse del terror sagrado —le sugirió la señora Brook a Van— del cual habla Mitchy tan a menudo. Con usted *yo* no estoy intentando —prosiguió para el señor Longdon— infundirle nada de eso, sino únicamente conseguir esa breve media hora a solas que me parece que por nada del mundo me concedería usted. Nada podría inducirlo a quedarse a solas conmigo.

—Caray, ¿qué diantres —preguntó Vanderbank— es lo que sospechas que el señor Longdon supone que quieres hacer?

—Oh, no es *eso* —dijo la señora Brook tristemente.

—No es ¿qué? —inquirió la duquesa riéndose.

—Que el señor Longdon tema que de uno u otro modo yo quiera… ¿cómo suele decirse?… camelarlo. —Ella habló como si desease que sí hubiera sido eso—. Tiene ideas más pesimistas.

—Pues bien, dinos de una vez cuáles son.

El señor Longdon había permanecido sin decir nada más, y sin embargo la señora Brook prefirió

desarrollar el asunto como en confianza entre ellos dos. Ella *era*, como decían los otros, portentosa.

—Usted no puede evitar considerarme —le habló directamente al anciano— bastante tortuosa. —El silencio que de esta guisa ella produjo transitoriamente, fue tan intenso como para insuflar una brusquedad que casi resultó grosera al pequeño «¡Ah!» con que seguidamente fue roto y cuyo emisor ninguno de sus tres acompañantes habría podido designar posteriormente. Ninguno habría querido encargarse de imputar una incorrección de la cual indudablemente cada uno no habría sido sino muy capaz—. Es sólo en calidad de madre —agregó— como solicito mi oportunidad.

Pero ante esto la duquesa ya estaba otra vez en la brecha:

—Pues entonces, por amor del cielo, aprovecha tu oportunidad, querida, para ocuparte de Harold, quien se erige en un ejemplo para la propia Nanda mediante el modo en que, ahí tras el piano, está pasándoselo bien con Lady Fanny.

Aunque esto sólo hubiese sido una maniobra de distracción que, por mor de la paz, a la duquesa se le hubiese antojado ejecutar, difícilmente habría podido resultar más efectivo. La señora Brook, cuya ubicación había sido precisamente lo que había sustraído de su vista el otro lado del piano, se estiró discreta pero raudamente:

—¿Harold *está* con Lady Fanny?

—Lo preguntas, hija mía —dijo la duquesa—, como si fuese algo demasiado grandioso para creerlo. Es esa nota de ansiedad —siguió para información del señor Longdon—, es esa nota de cuasiesperanza: una de esas que *ces messieurs*, que de hecho todos nosotros, admiramos y hallamos tan incomparables. Para Harold su madre ansia los mayores privilegios.

—Pues bien —declaró Vanderbank, que había echado una ojeada—, claramente Harold está conquistándolos. Eso le recuerda a uno lo que se cuenta sobre su popularidad.

—Su popularidad es verídica —porfió la señora Brook—. Cómo la logra, es algo que no sé.

—Ah, ¿*no* lo sabes? —exclamó a los cuatro vientos la duquesa.

—Harold es asombroso —siguió la señora Brook—. Yo observo… contengo la respiración. Pero asimismo me siento obligada a decir que me maravillo no poco. De un modo u otro los entusiasma a todos.

—Lady Fanny está tan satisfecha como Polichinela —dijo la duquesa.

—Esas grandes mujeres calmosas… gustan de criaturas más ligeras.

—Las grandes ballenas calmosas —dijo riendo la duquesa— se tragan a los peces pequeños.

—Oh, querida —repuso la señora Brook—, Harold puede ser paladeado, si tú quieres…

—¿Si *yo* quiero? —se mofó entre paréntesis la duquesa—. ¡Muchas gracias, cielo!

—…pero no puede, creo, ser comido. Todo ello trabaja —expuso la señora Brook— en pro de la más noble causa. Si Lady Fanny está satisfecha se quedará quietecita.

—¡Válgame Dios —espetó la duquesa—, nunca he oído afirmación más inmoral! Se lo planteo a usted, Longdon. ¿Quiere ella decir —le preguntó a este amigo— que si Lady Fanny comete un asesinato no cometerá ninguna otra cosa?

—Huy, no será un asesinato —dijo la señora Brook—. Lo que quiero decir es que si Harold, de uno y otro modo, la mantiene entretenida, Lady Fanny no se irá.

—¿Adonde no se irá? —inquirió el señor Longdon.

De inmediato Vanderbank lo informó:

—A alguna pequeña localidad italiana. ¿Le suena?

—Ah, sí. Igual que… ¿quién era? Se me ha olvidado.

—¿Ana Karenina? ¿Le suena Ana?

—Nanda —dijo la duquesa— le ha hablado al señor Longdon sobre Ana. Pero yo pensaba —continuó para la señora Brook— que, a estas alturas, Lady Fanny *debía* haberse fugado ya.

—¿Es que Petherton —repuso la señora Brook— no te tiene *au courant*?

La duquesa caviló benignamente:

—Me parece recordar que él me había dicho explícitamente que sí se había fugado. Y que luego había regresado.

—¿Porque esto se parece mucho a un nuevo comienzo? No. *Nosotros* sabemos. ¿Das por sentado, encima —preguntó la señora Brook—, que el señor Cashmore la habría readmitido?

La duquesa atalayó unos momentos a dicho caballero y su presente acompañante:

—¿Qué quieres que te diga? Tal vez ni se dio cuenta.

—Ah, está usted desintonizada, duquesa —dijo Vanderbank—. Antaño marchábamos todos acompasados como un solo hombre, pero ahora estamos haciéndonos añicos. Todo ello, descontada la presencia de usted, por culpa del casamiento de Mitchy.

—¡Oh —convino la señora Brook—, cuán absolutamente estoy de acuerdo con eso! Ya lo preveía yo. El hechizo se ha roto; el arpa ha perdido una cuerda. Nosotros ya no somos lo mismo. *Él* ya no es lo mismo.

—Con franqueza, querida —replicó la duquesa—, tampoco me parece que personalmente tú sigas siendo lo mismo.

—Huy, en cuanto a eso (que es lo que menos importa), quizá tendremos ocasión de comprobarlo. —Tras lo cual la señora Brook volvió a dirigirse al señor Longdon—: Todavía no le he explicado a qué me refería hace un rato. Le exigimos a Nanda.

El señor Longdon se quedó mirando pasmado:

—¿De vuelta en casa?

—En su querido rinconcito. Debe usted restituírnosla.

—¿Para siempre, quieres decir?

—Ah, en cierto modo eso dependerá de usted. Pero a efectos prácticos usted la ha acaparado estos cinco meses, y, sin el menor deseo de ser irrazonables, no obstante albergamos nuestros naturales sentimientos.

Este intercambio, al que de alguna manera las circunstancias confirieron un fuerte efecto de sorpresa y rareza, fue atendido por los otros en un rápido silencio que fue como la sensación de una ráfaga de aire frío, aunque con la disparidad, en lo referido a los espectadores, de que Vanderbank clavó intensamente la mirada en la señora Brook mientras que la duquesa escrutó no menos fijamente al señor Longdon, a quien claramente le dio a entender que si hacía un rato él mismo se había preguntado cómo la señora Brook podría influir, ahora podía darse por más que contestado. Lo cierto es que el señor Longdon se entregó, tras las últimas palabras de esta dama, a una pausa que muy bien pudo implicar algo de la plenitud de una nueva luz. Se contentó con decir con gran serenidad:

—Creía que ello os gustaba.

Ante esto su más cercana contertulia espetó:

—¿Que usted se haga cargo de la muchacha? ¡Les *gusta*! —La duquesa, mientras hablaba, se percató de la aproximación de Edward Brookenham, quien al cabo de unos instantes ya había entrado procedente de la otra habitación; y la energía del carácter femenino se manifestó súbitamente en la rauda señal que la duquesa le hizo a aquél—. Edward se lo confirmará a usted. —Edward ya estaba ante el semicírculo formado por ellos—. *¿Exigís*, querido —lo interpeló—, que Nanda vuelva de su estancia con el señor Longdon?

Cabía confiar plenamente en que a su flemático modo Edward tendría conciencia de que el oráculo debe estar a la altura de la sacerdotisa:

—¿Que si «exigimos» a Nanda, Jane? A lo que no estamos dispuestos es a *quedárnosla*. —Como si supiera muy bien lo que hacía, Brookenham miró a su esposa sólo después de haber hablado.

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Aquella respuesta tuvo un éxito clamoroso, al cual difícilmente más tarde habría podido negarse con rotundidad que contribuyó en cierto grado algún sonido de diversión emanado incluso del propio señor Longdon. Cierto es que la señora Brook halló, al exclamar que su marido era siempre tan exageradamente gentil, la nota más adecuada de resignada armonía; a consecuencia de lo cual por unos instantes éste les presentó bastante perplejamente lívido su fino rostro:

—«Gentil» es precisamente lo que yo creía no ser. Me refiero, ¿sabe usted? —continuó para el señor Longdon—, a que de veras no debe esperar de nosotros que lo dispensemos…

—…¿de una sola semana o día —recogió sus palabras el señor Longdon— del plazo a que consideran que me he comprometido? Mi querido señor, por favor no se figure que la duquesa lo ha interpelado en *mi* nombre.

—Ha sido por causa de tu esposa, delicioso tontorrón —aclaró aquella dama—. Si lo que deseabas era ser duro con nuestro amigo aquí presente, en realidad lo has sido *con ella*; lo cual proviene, sin duda, de la ausencia entre vosotros de una apropiada acción concertada de antemano. Has hablado a destiempo.

—¡Ah! —dijo Edward Brookenham.

—Así es, Jane. —La señora Brook continuó encajando aquello admirablemente—. Hoy nos vestimos a todo correr y no dispusimos de tiempo para nuestro habitual ensayo. Los días en que cenamos fuera, generalmente Edward lleva preparados tres pañuelos de bolsillo y seis chistes. Yo dejo a su propio arbitrio la gerencia de los pañuelos, pero la mayoría de las veces procuramos diseñar juntos por anticipado una estrategia para las demás cuestiones. Lo que se supone que ha de darle pie es algún encantador comentario humorístico de mi cosecha.

—¡Sólo que a veces él confunde —la acorrió Vanderbank— tus humorismos y tus seriedades!

Vanderbank se había levantado para dejarle el sitio a su anfitrión de tantas ocasiones y, habiéndolo obligado a aceptar la silla abandonada, ahora se retiró distraídamente hacia el rincón de la estancia ocupado por Nanda y el señor Cashmore.

—Todo eso está muy bien —reanudó la plática la duquesa—, pero no te absuelve en modo alguno, *cara mia*, del delito de plantear como una sentida necesidad familiar algo a lo cual Edward aparece profundamente insensible. Tu marido ha señalado con precisión la verdadera conveniencia de Nanda. A él le importa un bledo la *impresión* que causaríais exigiéndola.

—¿No querrás decir más bien, Jane, la impresión que causamos *no* exigiéndola? —inquirió la señora Brook con un distanciamiento ahora total—. Por supuesto, querido y viejo amigo —continuó para el señor Longdon—, prácticamente la duquesa me pone entre la espada y la pared cuando lo ayuda a ver (pues de otro modo usted no lo habría sospechado) que Edward y yo actuamos de consuno para aparecer como padres modélicos y al mismo tiempo no dejar de obtener de usted todo lo posible. Yo encarno el aspecto sentimental y él el práctico; de tal guisa que, de uno y otro modo, nos engalanamos con la gloria de nuestro sacrificio sin descuidar el «mantenimiento» de nuestra hija. A usted esto debe parecerle otra edificante ilustración de adónde han ido a parar las maneras londinenses; ¡a menos que de hecho —siguió parlando la señora Brook— se le antoje más bien (y hasta un grado que lo ciegue ante sus otras posibles implicaciones) la prueba definitiva de que soy demasiado tortuosa como para que usted sepa qué me propongo de veras!

El señor Longdon la había encarado, durante el silencio que había estado guardando, con su anterior terror ahora emblematizado únicamente por un rubor tan persistente que habría podido constituir un espontáneo elogio a una escena brillante.

—No tengo ni la más remota idea de qué te propones de veras —dijo—. Pero por favor entérate —agregó— de que es falso que me niegue a concederte la media hora a solas a que te referiste hace un rato.

—¿Realmente está usted deseoso de tener como invitada a la chiquilla durante el resto del año? —

requirió plácidamente Edward, hablando como si fuera enteramente inconsciente de que se hubiera dicho ninguna otra cosa.

Su esposa le clavó la mirada:

—El ingenio de tus acompañantes, querido, corta los aires como un rayo, pero pasa junto a tu cocorota únicamente, por fortuna, para dejarla sin un rasguño. Pese a todo, a fin de cuentas posees tu propia rara ironía, y no estoy segura de que destello alguno de la nuestra pueda llegar a comparársele. Sólo que, viéndose ante la nuestra también, ¿cómo puede en realidad el pobre señor Longdon escoger con cuál de las dos prefiere enfrentarse?

Ahora el pobre señor Longdon miró intensamente hacia Edward:

—Oh, con la del señor Brookenham, me parece, en cualquier momento y lugar. Incluso es *con usted*, lo confieso —le dijo a Edward—, con quien prefiero tener esa media hora a solas.

—¡Concedido! —manifestó la señora Brook—. Le enviaré mi marido a usted. Pero nos *hemos*, ya sabe, como dice Van, hecho añicos —siguió mientras giraba su hermosa cabeza y miraba por encima del hombro a un oyente cuyo acercamiento a ella por la espalda, aunque era imposible que lo hubiera visto, visiblemente ella había percibido en un santiamén—. Es tu casamiento, Mitchy, lo que ha ensombrecido nuestra antigua atmósfera brillante, lo que nos ha transformado más de lo que aún hemos advertido y lo que más crasa y horriblemente, mi querido amigo, te ha transformado *a ti*. Te acercas sigilosamente de un modo que le da escalofríos a una, mientras que en los buenos viejos tiempos siempre hacías tu irrupción con música y jolgorio. Adelántate hasta donde pueda verte: tal vez ya no me sea lícito amarte, pero al menos, espero, sí me será lícito mirarte. Dirige tus energías —continuó mientras la obedecía Mitchy— tanto como sea posible, por favor, contra nuestro aterido decaimiento. Echa leña al fuego y haznos apretujamos; ésta *era* nuestra mejor hora, bien lo sabes…, y tanto más cuanto que Tishy, según veo, está deshaciéndose de sus excedentes. Aquí vuelve el querido Van —concluyó—, derrotado, me parece, en su intento por arrancar a Nanda de su presa. ¿Nanda no quiere sentarse junto a esos pobres seres que somos *nosotros*? —le preguntó a Vanderbank, quien ahora, reuniéndose con Mitchy dentro del campo visual de todos, se quedó de pie junto a él y como poniéndose a las órdenes de ella.

—Naturalmente no la he interrogado —contestó el joven.

—Entonces, ¿qué has hecho?

—Sencillamente me he dado un pequeño paseo.

Ante esto la señora Brook se mostró afligida para Mitchy:

—Mira a lo que hemos llegado. En *tu* época, ¿alguna vez se nos ocurría «paseamos» salvo a guisa de nítido efecto de nuestros objetos bellos? Por favor regresa junto a Nanda —le dijo a Vanderbank— y dile que deseo muy particularmente que se nos una para este delicioso final de velada.

—Ya viene a unírsenos por voluntad propia —dijo la duquesa—, al igual que el señor Cashmore, y al igual que Tishy (*voyez!*), quien no ha logrado retener (¡bendita sea su pequeña espalda desnuda!) a nadie a quien no habría debido retener. Dado que por ahora nadie más piensa unírsenos, resultaría bastante propicio a la intimidad que Tishy echara el cerrojo a la puerta.

—Pero ¿qué diablos, mi querida Jane —se maravilló consternada la señora Brook—, estás proponiéndonos que hagamos?

En su aprensión, la señora Brook había mirado expresivamente a todos sus amigos, mas la mirada de la duquesa no erró más allá de Harold y Lady Fanny:

—Quizá ello serviría para impedir durante un rato más que los componentes de esa pareja huyan juntos.

La señora Brook no hizo una pausa mayor:

—Pero ¿acaso ello no sería, en lo tocante a otra pareja, como cerrar las puertas del establo después de… como queráis llamarlo? ¿Es que Petherton y Aggie no parecen haber huido juntos ya? Mitchy, amigo, ¿dónde diablos está tu esposa?

—Reconozco —dijo la duquesa alegremente— que mi sobrina está dondequiera que esté Petherton. De eso estoy segura, pues *existe* una amistad, acuérdate, que no se ha interrumpido. Petherton no se ha marchado, ¿verdad? —le preguntó a Mitchy a su vez.

Pero otra vez, antes de que él pudiese hablar, su respuesta fue usurpada:

—¡Mitchy está silencioso, Mitchy está alterado, Mitchy está raro! —proclamó la señora Brook mientras los recién incorporados al grupo (Tishy y Nanda y el señor Cashmore, así como Lady Fanny y Harold tras un instante y al percibir el desplazamiento de los otros) lo agrandaban hasta formar, con recíprocas acomodaciones y ayudas, un agradable círculo conversacional donde el protagonista del comentario de la proclamadora, sobre una baja otomana y mirando sombríamente a su extraño modo casi en todas las direcciones simultáneamente, se constituyó en el conspicuo centro de atracción. Tishy se colocó junto al

señor Longdon; y Nanda, aún flanqueada por el señor Cashmore, entre este caballero y su esposa, quien tenía a Harold a su otro lado. Edward Brookenham estaba contiguo a su hijo y a Vanderbank, quien fácilmente habría podido sentirse, a despecho de la distancia y teniendo en cuenta, como sucedía, sus respectivas ubicaciones en el círculo, bastante públicamente encarado con el señor Longdon—. ¿Está en la otra habitación la esposa de Mitchy? —le inquirió ahora la señora Brook a Tishy.

Tras una larga mirada en derredor, Tishy volvió en sí para brindar explicaciones sobre dicha invitada:

—Oh, sí: está jugando con él.

—¿Con quién, querida?

—Caramba, pues con Petherton. Creía que tú lo sabías.

—¿Que yo sabía que están jugando…? —La señora Brook se mostró casi socrática.

—Verdaderamente hoy mi mujer está en vena —observó mientras tanto, sin resonancia, el señor Brookenham para Vanderbank.

—¡De veras brillante! —respondió Vanderbank.

—Pero es un poco atrevidilla, ya me entiendes —completó Edward tras una pausa.

—¡Huy, toda una traidora! —dijo su interlocutor con una breve risa reprimida que para un espectador habría podido significar un súbito asombro ante tamaño destello analítico viniendo de quien venía.

Cuando en todo caso volvió a quedar libre la atención de Vanderbank, la anfitriona, aguijada, ya estaba describiendo el juego, como lo había llamado ella, a que estaban entregados los ausentes:

—Ella ha escondido un libro y él está intentando encontrarlo.

—¿El juego del escondite? ¡Vaya, eso es algo bastante inocente, Mitch! —exclamó la señora Brook.

Hablando por vez primera, Mitchy la encaró con exacerbada tenebrosidad:

—¿Así lo crees realmente?

—¡Eso es la inocencia *de ella*! —exclamó riendo la duquesa.

—Y ¿no te parece que Petherton lo habrá encontrado *ya*? —prosiguió seriamente la señora Brook para Tishy—. ¿Acaso eso no es algo a lo que *todos* podríamos jugar si…? —Tras lo cual sin embargo, callándose abruptamente, cambió de registro—: Nanda, corazón, por favor ve a invitarlos a unírsenos.

Ante esto, Mitchy, sobre la otomana, se giró inmediatamente hacia la muchacha, quien lo miró antes de hablar.

—Iré si me lo pide Mitchy.

—Pero ¿y si teme realmente —dijo su madre— que en ello pueda haber algo…?

De un tirón Mitchy se reorientó hacia la señora Brook:

—Bueno, verás, no quiero dar libre rienda a mis temores. ¡Supón que *hubiera* algo! Dejadme no saberlo.

Ella lo afrontó con ternura:

—Entiendo. No podrías, tan prematuramente, soportarlo.

—¡Ah, pero, *savez-vous* —intervino la duquesa con cierta majestuosidad—, sois siniestros!

—Dejadlos tranquilos —insistió Mitchy—. En cualquier caso no deseamos un juego retozón colectivo.

—¡Huy, yo pensaba que precisamente para eso —dijo la señora Brook— era para lo que la duquesa quería echarle el cerrojo a la puerta! Tal vez, por lo demás —se volvió hacia Tishy—, Petherton no haya encontrado el libro todavía.

—No podrá encontrarlo —dijo Tishy con simplicidad.

—Pero ¿por qué no?

—Verás, ella está sentada encima del libro. —Tishy sintió, según fue manifiesto, la gravedad de la explicación—. Conque a menos que él la fuerce a levantarse…

—…¿no podrá culminar su desesperada búsqueda? ¡Oh, espero que no la forzará a levantarse! —protestó maravillosamente la señora Brook. Esto fue dicho de un modo que estimuló al círculo, y unas unánimes carcajadas parecieron coronar por fin su invocación, recientemente formulada, al espíritu gregario—. Pero ¿cómo es exactamente —prosiguió— el libro escogido para tal emplazamiento? Espero que no sea muy voluminoso.

—Oh, ¿acaso los libros sobre los que la gente se sienta[19] —inquirió con desparpajo el señor Cashmore — no son lógicamente los peores?

—No tan lógicamente —le respondió Harold con desparpajo no menor—. La gente se sienta, de continuo, hoy día (quiero decir en los periódicos y las reuniones sociales), sobre obras la mar de interesantes. Caramba, yo mismo leo libros que no podría (¡palabra de honor que jamás me aventuraría a ello!) leeros aquí en voz alta.

—¡Qué lástima —espetó su padre con el especial matiz de sequedad que era característica peculiar de Edward— que no te hayas traído uno de tus favoritos para hacer la prueba!

Harold miró en su derredor como si, pensándolo bien, aquello hubiese sido una feliz idea:

—Bueno, aquí Nanda es la única muchacha.

—Y la hermana propia nunca cuenta —dijo la duquesa.

—Precisamente porque el libro es indecente —volvió a hablar Tishy en especial interés de la señora Brook— es por lo que Lord Petherton trata de hallarlo a toda costa.

Se intensificó el tenue interés de la señora Brook:

—Entonces, ¿es una auténtica lucha cuerpo a cuerpo?

—Él dice que ella no lo leerá… ella dice que sí.

—Ah, eso se debe, ¿verdad, Jane? —interpeló la señora Brook—, a que durante tanto tiempo él la ha supervisado y asesorado en ese aspecto. ¿Es que a estas alturas todavía no se ha dado cuenta (con lo endiabladamente listo que es) de la extraordinaria forma en que ella se ha desmadrado?

—¿«A estas alturas»? —hizo de eco Harold—. Queridísima mamaíta, dices unas cosas tan lindas. Fue sólo hará unas diez semanas, ¿no es así, Mitch? No te importará que yo diga esto, espero —añadió con gran solicitud.

Mitchy tenía vuelta hacia él la espalda y, encorvándola ligeramente, bajó la cabeza y apretó las manos entre las rodillas:

—Ya no me importa cosa alguna que diga nadie.

—¡Santo Dios, ¿has llegado ya a semejantes extremos?! —dijo Harold riéndose afectuosamente.

—Antiguamente se mostraba reactivo ante cualquier cosa. Mi querido amigo, ¿*qué* es lo que pasa? —demandó la señora Brook—. ¿Es que todo se sucede demasiado deprisa para ti?

—Por piedad, ¿*de qué* estáis hablando? ¡Eso es lo que yo querría averiguar! —manifestó con vivacidad el señor Cashmore.

—Pues de que ella se *ha* desbocado… si a Mitchy no le importa que lo diga —matizó Harold con un tono de gran tacto y refinamiento—. Pero ¿es que las muchachas (me refiero a cuando son como Aggie y en cuanto las dejan sueltas) no se desbocan siempre? Eso es lo que *yo* querría averiguar. No creo que mamá se desbocase, ni Tishy, ni la duquesa —les comunicó a los demás—, aunque mamá y Tishy y la duquesa, me da la impresión, debían ser todas o bien de la escuela que sabía, ¿no os parece?, una barbaridad de cosas antes, o bien de la tipología que se lo toma todo con más calma después.

—Creo que una mujer sólo puede hablar en su propio nombre. *Yo* me lo tomé todo con bastante calma lo mismo antes que después —dijo la señora Brook. Luego con un pequeño cabeceo ceremonioso le dirigió al señor Cashmore una de sus encantadoras sonrisas enfermizas—: De lo que estoy hablando, *s'il vous plaît*, es del matrimonio.

—¡Me pregunto si os dais cuenta —espetó la duquesa ante aquello— de lo estúpidos que parecéis hablando! ¿Cuándo se ha visto, en cualquier sociedad que honradamente pueda llamarse «buena», que *no* represente una diferencia el que una joven criatura inocente, una flor cuidada y atendida, vea trastrocada de un día para otro toda su conciencia de las cosas? La gente pone mala cara e intercambia miradas extraordinarias y se da codazos mutuamente, a vuestro modo inglés, en los costados y comenta por los rincones que mi pobre queridita se ha «desmadrado». ¡*Je crois bien*, se ha desmadrado! La desposé (no me importa decirlo ahora) precisamente para que lo *hiciese*, y me sentiría enormemente avergonzada de todos los implicados si no lo hubiese hecho. No la desposé, os ruego que lo creáis, para que se «enmadrase» más, y si alguno de vosotros piensa en asustar a Mitchy con ello pienso que lo logrará en tan escasa medida como me asustáis *a mí*. Aunque ella haya tardado muy poco tiempo en hacerlo (tal como muy vívidamente lo expresa Harold), ¿ante quién de vosotros he pretendido jamás, me gustaría a mí saber, que tardaría muchísimo? Seguramente haya muchachas que habrían tardado más, lo mismo que ciertamente hay otras que no habrían precisado siquiera una hora. Seguro que no os pilla de nuevas que si entre todos nosotros algunas jóvenes personas son muy tontas y otras muy inteligentes, *mi* querida hija nunca ha sido ni una cosa ni la otra, sino tan sólo una chiquilla perfectamente educada y deliciosamente aplicada. ¡Oh, *eso* desde luego! Si es tan aplicada que no sabéis qué hacer con ella, a duras penas es *su* culpa. Pero a eso sumadle que Mitchy es inmensamente benévolo, y ya tenéis el todo. ¿Qué más queréis?

La señora Brook, que parecía increíblemente impresionada, respondió con la más pronta comprensión, aunque como si hubiese habido alguna otra posibilidad:

—No creo —y sus ojos apelaron a los demás— que queramos *nada* más, ¿verdad?, que el todo.

—¡Cielos, espero que no! —comentó su marido para Vanderbank tan privadamente como antes—. Jane (para tratarse de una concurrencia heterogénea) va derecha al grano.

Durante un instante y con una breve inmovilidad peculiar, Vanderbank escudriñó el círculo:

—¿Es lícito calificamos como «heterogéneos»? Solamente hay *una* muchacha.

Edward Brookenham le lanzó una mirada a su hija, y repuso:

—Ya, pero me gustaría que hubiese más.

—¿*De veras* te gustaría? —Y la carcajada de Vanderbank ante aquella llamativa opinión lo hizo sordo, por algunos momentos, a las demás conversaciones. Mas cuando volvió a prestar atención, aún no había sido alcanzada ninguna victoria.

Naturalmente la señora Brook era quien agitaba el estandarte:

—Cuando dices, queridísima, que no sabemos qué «hacer» con la aplicación de Aggie, ¿no tomas en ninguna consideración el modo como nos inclinamos ante la misma y la veneramos? No veo qué otra cosa podemos (aquí dentro) hacer con ella, aun cuando *hemos* colegido que, justamente ahí al lado, Petherton está hallándole otra diferente utilidad. Únicamente está a nuestro alcance hacer lo que buenamente podemos cada uno a nuestro modo. Por lo tanto no sucumbas, Jane, a la engañosa fascinación de un agravio. Sería una quimera. Nadie te ha infligido uno. La belleza de la existencia que tantos de nosotros hemos compartido durante tanto tiempo —y evidenció que era para el señor Longdon para quien más en particular pronunciaba estas palabras— radica precisamente en que nadie ha sufrido ninguno jamás. Nadie ha soñado que haya ocurrido nada semejante: habría sido una grosera nota falsa, una nota de violencia incongruente. ¿Alguna vez *tú* has oído hablar de algún agravio, Van? ¿Y tú, mi pobrecito Mitchy? Pero ya veis con vuestros propios ojos —remató con un suspiro y antes de que ninguno de los dos pudiese contestar — cuán inferiores nos hemos vuelto toda vez que, aunque sea para defendemos, hemos de recalcar tales cosas.

Mitchy, que durante un buen rato había permanecido mirando hacia el suelo, ahora alzó su honda mirada saltona y estiró al máximo su cerrada boca.

—¡Oh, yo creo que aún somos bastante buenos! —replicó entonces.

Lo cierto es que la señora Brook pareció, después de una pausa y tomando a dirigirse a Tishy, ofrecer una involuntaria ilustración de ello, volviendo como tras una brevísima desviación sobre la cuestión transitoriamente relegada:

—Me siento obligada a decir, tanto más cuanto que no es algo que ignoréis, que no veo que haya nada que Aggie no pueda leer ahora. —De repente, sin embargo, su mirada a la informadora se impregnó de cierta preocupación—: El libro de marras, ¿es una obra *muy* monstruosa?

La señora Grendon, con tantas cosas estos últimos minutos propicias a hacerla resaltar, por fin se hizo destacadamente más presente:

—Eso es lo que afirma Lord Petherton. Por lo que sabe del autor.

—¿Así que Petherton quiere impedir que ella…?

—Sí: impedir que ella la lea primero. Creo que antes quiere comprobar por sí mismo si es adecuada para ella.

—Ese es uno de los más hermosos servicios, en mi opinión —dijo la duquesa—, que un caballero puede prestarle a una muchacha a quien desee serle útil. Yo no digo que Petherton sepa siempre cuán hermoso es un libro, pero confío en él a ciegas para que declare cuán feo es.

El señor Longdon, que durante todo este rato había permanecido sentado silencioso e inmóvil, abandonó su asiento al oír aquello, y de esa forma patentemente le facilitó a la señora Brook tanta justificación como ésta requería. También ella se levantó, y este movimiento le permitió ver en la puerta de la habitación contigua algo que le arrancó una rápida exclamación:

—¡Pues ya puede comunicamos él mismo su dictamen… porque aquí vienen los dos! —Lord Petherton, entrando con excitación y seguido tan de cerca por su joven compañera que ésta dio la impresión de estar persiguiéndolo, agitó triunfalmente por encima de su cabeza un pequeño volumen forrado con papel azul. Ante la aparición de ambos hubo un movimiento general y, para cuando se hubieron unido a sus amigos, la concurrencia, empujando asientos hacia atrás y haciendo circular discretamente una variedad de gestos mudos, ya estaba de pie sin excepción—. ¡Mirad: la *ha* forzado a levantarse! —dijo la señora Brook.

La pequeña Aggie, singularmente embellecida por una cascada de perlas, acogió aquello como si hubiese sido un guiño de complicidad:

—Sí, y ha sido *auténticamente* forzarme. ¡Pero claro está que —continuó con el más sonrosado buen humor y como si la señora Brook entendiese plenamente lo que ella quería decir— desde el instante en que una siente las garras de una persona, y casi los dientes, en su propia carne…!

Fue con poca facilidad, empero, como la atención de la señora Brook se desplazó de las perlas de Aggie a sus otros encantos; atalayándolas, de hecho, con tan insistente fijeza que Harold le hizo un rápido comentario sobre ello a Lady Fanny:

—¡Cuando la pobre de mamá se pone a pensar, ya sabes, que Nanda habría podido poseerlas!…

La atención de Lady Fanny, en cuanto a eso, las había eludido igual de escasamente:

—¡Pues me atrevo a decir que *yo* las poseería si las hubiese querido!

—Cielo santo… ¿*habrías* podido soportarlo a él? —repuso el muchacho—. ¡Aunque ya me he convencido de que las mujeres son capaces de soportar cualquier cosa! —concluyó, profundo. Mientras tanto su madre, sobreponiéndose, había comenzado a dejar escapar exclamaciones a propósito de las marcas en los brazos de Aggie; y a continuación Harold se vio distraído de su propia meditación sobre lo que él «personalmente», como habría dicho él mismo, no habría sido capaz de soportar, gracias a una rauda mirada al trofeo de Lord Petherton, que él le arrebató sin pérdida de tiempo—: ¿La manzana de la discordia? —Lord Petherton lo había cedido sin oponer resistencia, y Harold quedó absorto contemplando el forro—: ¡Córcholis, que me aspen si no lleva escrito el nombre de Van!

—¿El de Van? —Su madre estaba lo bastante cerca para arrebatárselo a su vez, tras lo cual encaró con celeridad al dueño del volumen—: ¡Querido amigo, es la última obra que me prestaste! Pero creo —agregó, volviéndose hacia Tishy— que yo jamás te traspasé semejante creación *a ti*.

—¡Fue precisamente el ver la letra del señor Van —explicó Aggie escrupulosamente— lo que me hizo pensar que servidora estaba en libertad de…!

—¡Pero no es la letra del señor Van! —La señora Brook casi sonrió ante la equivocación. Sin vacilaciones le alargó el libro al señor Longdon—: ¿*Es* la letra del señor Van?

Sosteniendo el disputado objeto, para examinar el cual se puso los quevedos, enseguida el señor Longdon, sin hablar, miró por encima de estos adminículos directamente a Nanda, quien le devolvió la mirada no menos directamente.

—Yo fui quien escribió el nombre del señor Van. —La mirada de la muchacha iba destinada al señor Longdon, pero sus palabras más bien a la concurrencia—. Yo me traje aquí este libro de Buckingham Crescent y lo dejé por casualidad en la otra habitación.

—Espero de veras, querida mía —replicó su madre—, que fuese por casualidad. Pero ¿para qué diantres te lo trajiste aquí? Es demasiado repulsivo.

Nanda pareció extrañarse.

—¿Lo es? —musitó.

—Entonces ¿no lo has leído?

Ella titubeó:

—Actualmente es muy difícil saber, pienso, lo que es repulsivo y lo que no.

—Se lo trajo aquí únicamente para que lo leyera *yo* —intervino seriamente Tishy.

La señora Brook semejó maravillarse:

—¿Nanda lo *recomendó*?

—Oh, no: todo lo contrario. —Como atemorizada por tan pública discusión, Tishy perdió ligeramente el hilo—: Se limitó a informarme…

—…¿del nauseabundo argumento? —gimió la señora Brook.

Se suscitó un eco tan reduplicador del carácter grotesco de este último intercambio, que hubo de transcurrir un minuto antes de que fuera posible oír decir a Vanderbank:

—La responsabilidad es enteramente mía por poner en circulación la desdichada obra. De todas formas —agregó bienhumoradamente y como para minimizar si no la causa por lo menos la consecuencia— creo estar de acuerdo con Nanda en que no es más inmoral que cualquier otra obra.

La señora Brook había recuperado el volumen de las manos inertes del señor Longdon y ahora, sin echarle otra ojeada, lo ocultó tras la espalda con un desacostumbrado aspecto de rigurosidad:

—Oh, ¿cómo eres capaz de decir eso, mi querido amigo, respecto de una obra tan asqueante?

En esos momentos la discusión los había juntado cara a cara.

—Entonces ¿*tú* la has leído?

Ella vaciló, luego arrojó el libro sobre el asiento vacío más cercano, donde el señor Cashmore se apoderó de él sin pérdida de tiempo.

—¿No fue para eso para lo que me la prestaste? —demandó ella. Sin embargo tomó a requerir a su hija antes de que él pudiese contestar—: ¿Has leído esta novela, Nanda?

—Sí, mamá.

—¡Caramba, carambita! —exclamó el señor Cashmore, divertido y pasando las hojas.

A estas alturas el señor Longdon ya se había llegado solemnemente hasta Tishy:

—Buenas noches.

LIBRO NOVENO

VANDERBANK

XXXI

—En tal caso creo que será preferible que aguardes —dijo la señora Brook— hasta que yo compruebe si ya se ha marchado. —Y cuando al instante siguiente se presentaron los criados con el té, tuvo oportunidad de formular su indagación—: ¿El señor Cashmore está aún con la señorita Brookenham?

—No, señora —contestó el lacayo—. Hace cinco minutos que acompañé hasta la puerta al señor Cashmore.

Durante un corto rato subsiguiente Vanderbank patentizó con su proceder lo que experimentaba a causa de no sentirse libre para comentar de inmediato aquellas palabras: moviéndose por toda la habitación sin propósito definido mientras la mesa del té era preparada por los criados y sin hacer un esfuerzo para charlar, en aras de las apariencias, sobre cualquier otro asunto. La señora Brook hizo, por su parte, tan poco esfuerzo que el silencio —que los momentáneos acompañantes de ambos tuvieron todo el efecto de prolongar a base de hacerlo todo con una perceptible lentitud— se convirtió precisamente en una de esas valiosas luces para la servidumbre que ilusamente las personas imaginan no haber encendido gracias a haberse abstenido de hablar. Pero Vanderbank retomó la palabra tan pronto como quedó cerrada la puerta:

—¿Es que Cashmore sale y entra en esta casa con tal desenvoltura sin siquiera hablar *contigo*?

La señora Brook dejó de contemplar la encendida chimenea que, a últimos de mayo, era el único deleite de la cruda tarde fría, y dijo:

—Es natural que a servidora le guste cerrar las cortinas y chismorrear al amor de la lumbre.

—¡Oh, «chismorrear»! —dijo fatigadamente Vanderbank mientras se aproximaba a la bonita mesa sobre la cual había sido colocado el refrigerio.

Ella, cuando estaba a punto de servirle, se detuvo:

—¿No preferirías tomar el té *con ella*?

Él osciló unos instantes:

—¿Es que ella toma el té por su cuenta?

—¿Quieres decir que no estabas al tanto? —La señora Brook preguntó esto con asombro—. Tal ignorancia sobre lo que hago por ella pone, creo, al descubierto cómo nos has tratado últimamente.

—¿Al no haber venido durante tanto tiempo?

—Durante más semanas, durante más meses de los que puedo contar. Prácticamente desde… ¿cuándo fue aquello?… finales de enero, aquella noche de la cena en casa de Tishy.

—Sí, aquella horrible noche.

—¿Horrible dices?

—Horrible.

—Es que todo este tiempo sin ti —explicó la señora Brook— ha sido tan desdichado que temo haber perdido toda conciencia de lo transcurrido con anterioridad. —Entonces le planteó su disyuntiva para tomar el té—: ¿*Quieres* tomarlo en el piso superior?

Él asió la taza:

—Sí, y aquí también. —Tras lo cual él no dijo nada más hasta que, echándole primero leche para enfriarlo, hubo concluido de beber su té—: Eso no es estrictamente cierto, bien lo sabes. *He* estado acudiendo aquí de visita.

—Sí, pero siempre con otras personas (te las has arreglado de algún modo): las personas inadecuadas. Eso no cuenta.

—Huy, de uno y otro modo, opino que todo cuenta. Y te olvidas de que vine a cenar.

—¡Oh… una única vez!

—La única vez que me invitaste. Así que no estropees a base de reproches tardíos la belleza de tu propio proceder. Tú has sido, como de costumbre, suprema.

—Ah, pero en ello no ha habido ninguna belleza. Exclusivamente ha habido —continuó la señora Brook— simple y desolada aceptación, que es la maldición de mi dichosa inteligencia. Nos hemos hecho añicos, pero por lo menos no soy tan tonta como para no haberlo percibido a tiempo. Desde el momento en que servidora lo percibió, ¿para qué insistir en rituales despojados de sentido? Si *tú* lo percibiste, y estuviste tan dispuesto a suprimirlos, mi papel fue el de siempre: aceptar lo inevitable. Nunca volveremos a estar unidos. El golpetazo fue demasiado violento.

Durante unos segundos Vanderbank no dijo nada; luego por fin exclamó:

—¡Tú debes saber cuán violento!

A despecho de todo, esta vez la compostura del precioso semblante femenino sobrevivió:

—¿Yo?

—El golpetazo —respondió él— fue ciertamente tan total, en mi opinión, como tu deliberación. Cada uno de los «añicos» da fe de tu victoria. Cinco minutos fueron suficientes.

Ella semejó preguntarse adonde quería él ir a parar.

—Pero a ciencia cierta no fueron minutos *míos* —declaró—. ¿Quién te ha dicho que yo urdí el casamiento de Mitchy?

—El casamiento de Mitchy no tiene nada que ver con ello.

—Entiendo. —Al menos, ella conservaba para beneficio de todos el antiguo interés—. Piensas que a eso sí habríamos podido sobrevivir. —Pareció brillar tenuemente una novedosa reflexión sobre aquel acontecimiento—: Me siento obligada a decir que el matrimonio de Mitchy promete peripecias.

—Triunfaste aquella velada en casa de la señora Grendon. —Él habló como si no la hubiera oído—. Fue una maravillosa actuación. Nos hiciste caer (derribando cada una de las grandes columnas en el momento oportuno) igual que Sansón hizo caer el templo. En aquel momento quedé más o menos maltrecho y sepultado, y en mi agitación y aturdimiento no comprendí plenamente qué era lo que había sobrevenido. Pero ahora sí.

—¿Estás segurísimo? —preguntó con seriedad la señora Brook.

—Bueno, yo soy bobo comparado contigo, pero ya ves que me he tomado mi tiempo. Lo he desentrañado todo. He pasado noches en vela reflexionándolo, tanto más cuanto que he tenido que hacerlo completamente a solas… estando los Mitchy en Italia y Grecia. He echado de menos la ayuda de él.

—Pues a partir de ahora la tendrás —dijo amablemente la señora Brook—. Viajan de regreso.

—Y ¿cuándo arriban?

—Cualquier día de éstos, tengo entendido.

—¿Te ha escrito Mitchy?

—No —dijo la señora Brook—; ése es el quid. Precisamente así nos hemos hecho añicos. Pero claro está que tú sí habrás recibido alguna noticia.

—Ni una palabra.

—Ah, entonces la catástrofe es absoluta.

Vanderbank meditó un instante y repuso:

—No del todo, ¿no crees?…; me refiero a que no lo será por completo a menos que Mitchy no le haya escrito a Nanda.

—Y ¿le ha escrito? —Ella había recobrado el entusiasmo.

—Oh, estoy haciendo suposiciones. ¿*Tú* no tienes idea?

—¿Cómo *he* de tenerla?

También a esto él le dio vueltas:

—Pues como consecuencia de que emprendieses tan brusca y portentosamente, en casa de Tishy, la acción que, unos días después tal como supe posteriormente, sería coronada con un grado de éxito todavía vigente. ¿Por qué, en resumidas cuentas (si iba a ser para saber tan poco sobre ella y no hacerte más íntima suya), forzaste la restitución de Nanda?

Había una razón nítida, según se desprendió del semblante femenino, con tal que ella consiguiese recordar cuál era:

—¿Que por qué forcé…? —Entonces, como recibiendo una iluminación, exclamó—: ¡Tiene gracia que me preguntes… a estas alturas!

—Ah, ¿*has* notado que no te he preguntado hasta ahora? No obstante —agregó Van con prontitud—, sé bastante bien cuánto notas las cosas. ¿Nanda no te ha contado si ha recibido noticias o no?

—Definitivamente no. Pero no supondrás, espero, que fue para fisgonear en sus asuntos para lo que la hice volver.

Ante esto, por primera vez Vanderbank se encendió con una carcajada:

—¿«Hacerla volver»? ¡Cuánto me gustan tus expresiones!

—¿Conque, a pesar de los pesares —preguntó ilusionada—, te recuerdo ligeramente los *bon temps*? Oh —suspiró—, actualmente ya no tengo buenas ocurrencias. Pero por supuesto Jane y yo nos vemos… aunque tampoco con tanta asiduidad como antaño. Mediante Jane es como he tenido noticias sobre lo que ella llama sus «jovencitos». Es tan chocante pintar a Mitchy como un jovencito. Él está tan viejo como la eternidad, y su esposa, que ayer mismo tenía unos seis años, en la actualidad tiene unos cuarenta a efectos prácticos. Y también he visto a Petherton —agregó la señora Brook— tras su regreso.

—Su regreso ¿de dónde?

—Caramba, ha estado con la pareja en Corfú, Malta, Chipre y no sé cuántos sitios más: navegando en yate, gastando el dinero de Mitchy, «trasteando», como lo llamó él, y no sé cuántas cosas más. Ha estado con ellos durante semanas.

—¿Hasta que Jane, quieres decir, lo ha hecho volver?

—Creo que ha debido ser eso.

—Bueno, eso es mejor —dijo Van— que si Mitchy hubiera tenido que hacerlo irse.

—¡Oh, Mitchy! —articuló polisémicamente la señora Brook.

Su visitante hizo gala de plena anuencia:

—¿Verdad que es un hombre pasmoso?

—Único.

Él guardó un breve silencio.

—Pero ¿a qué juega ella? —inquirió.

Para la señora Brook, al parecer, fue ésta una pregunta de tal variedad de aplicación que hubo de explorar empíricamente:

—¿Jane?

—Cielos, no. Creo que ya lo sabemos todo sobre «Jane», ¿verdad?

—Vaya —meditó la señora Brook—, no estoy por completo segura de saberlo todo *yo*. ¡Precisamente estos últimos días he recibido una novedosa impresión!

—Y bien, ¿de qué esta vez? —preguntó divertido Vanderbank al quedarse ella sosteniendo la nota.

—Huy, de aún más negras profundidades. Pero es que la pobre Jane… claro está que al fin y al cabo es humana. Está fuera de sí por una cosa y por otra… pero si quiere ser coherente no puede manifestarlo. Había insistido tantísimo en haber logrado con la ayuda de Petherton instruir a Aggie para ser una *femme chamante*…

—…¿que ya es demasiado tarde para denunciar que ahora la ayuda de Petherton es superflua? En tal caso, ¿quieres decir que él es tan bestia que después de todo lo que Mitchy ha hecho por él…? —Ante aquella creciente imagen, Vanderbank se interrumpió por simple repugnancia.

—Yo lo creo muy capaz de considerar con una magnífica insolencia de egoísmo que lo que *más* ha hecho Mitchy habrá sido volver accesible a Aggie de una forma que (por decoro y delicadeza naturalmente, cosas de las que Petherton se ufana con prolijidad) desde luego ella *no* podía ser cuando soltera. Su casamiento lo ha simplificado todo.

Vanderbank asimiló todo aquello:

—¡Eso de «accesible» es muy bueno! Entonces (y es a lo que me refería hace unos instantes), ¿ya Aggie se ha vuelto así?

A fuer de sincera, no obstante, todavía la señora Brook sólo estaba en condiciones de hacer cábalas:

—Es exactamente lo que me muero por comprobar.

Ante esto su compañero sonrió:

—¡«Incluso en nuestras cenizas pervive la llama indómita»! Pero, en tales circunstancias, ¿qué hay del propio pobre Mitchy? Difícilmente su casamiento ha podido simplificarlo *a él* hasta tal grado.

Esto fue algo, a pesar de todo, que la señora Brook tuvo que sopesar:

—No lo sé. Renuncio. ¡El asunto fue la mar de extraño!

También su amigo guardó silencio, y fue como si, durante un breve rato, permanecieran mirándose mutuamente a cuenta de ello y a cuenta de lo que entre ellos no había sido dicho.

—¡*Fue* «desusado»! —se limitó él a dejar caer finalmente.

Apenas habría sido propio de la señora Brook, así y todo —según pareció ella sentir pasado un instante —, rodear de un exceso de silencio el asunto:

—Él hizo lo que hace un hombre (especialmente en ese respecto) cuando un hombre no hace lo que desea.

—¿Quieres decir que hizo lo que deseaba otra persona?

—Vaya, lo que él mismo *no* deseaba. Y si es infeliz —siguió ella— sabrá a quién quejarse.

—Oh —dijo Vanderbank—, aun cuando sea infeliz no será persona proclive a lo que podrías llamar «desahogarse» ante ella. Buscará compensaciones en otra parte y le dará igual cualquier ridículo…

—¿A quién te refieres al decir «ella»? —preguntó la señora Brook cual si intuyese que algo en su propio rostro lo había hecho callarse—. Yo no hablaba —especificó— de su esposa.

—¡Ah! —dijo Vanderbank.

—Aggie es irrelevante —insistió ella.

—¡Ah! —repitió—. ¿Te referías a la duquesa? —sugirió enseguida.

—¡No digas estupideces! —replicó ella—. *Quizá* él no sea infeliz (¡*no* lo quiera Dios!) —siguió adelante —. Pero si lo es la emprenderá con Nanda.

Van semejó dudar acerca de aquello:

—¿«La emprenderá» con ella?

—Vaya, querrá saber, tal como hace poco un norteamericano me preguntó refiriéndose a no sé quién, qué es lo que ella «va a hacer» al respecto.

Vanderbank, que había permanecido de pie, quedó paralizado ante esto durante un lapso más prolongado que ante cualquier otra cosa hasta ese instante:

—Pero ¿qué *puede* ella «hacer»?…

—De nuevo es exactamente lo que siento curiosidad por comprobar. —Seguidamente la señora Brook habló dirigiéndole una mirada al reloj—: Pero si no subes a verla…

—…¿mi intención de hablar con ella a solas puede acabar frustrada por la posibilidad de que ella baje al enterarse de que estoy aquí? —Él había sacado su propio reloj—. Ahora subo. Pero, a guisa de luz sobre tal peligro, ¿acaso *tú*, teniendo en cuenta las circunstancias, bajarías?

Para la señora Brook, empero, aquella luz sólo semejó tenebrosidad:

—Oh, tú no me amas *a mí*.

Entonces Vanderbank, con el reloj todavía en la mano, contempló fijamente, a modo de alternativa, la encendida chimenea.

—Todavía no me has respondido, ya sabes —comentó—, si actualmente el señor Cashmore se presenta aquí *todos* los días.

—Mi querido amigo, ¿cómo puedo saberlo? Precisamente tienes la ocasión de averiguarlo tú mismo.

—¿Sonsacándoselo a *ella*, quieres decir?

La señora Brook vaciló, y dijo:

—A menos que prefieras al lacayo. ¿Nuevamente necesito recordarte que, con su propia sala de estar y uno de los criados, amén de su doncella, totalmente a su disposición, la independencia de mi hija es perfecta?

Vanderbank, que había parecido estar cronometrándose, se guardó el reloj.

—En ese caso me siento obligado a decir que, en vista de un distanciamiento tan marcado, cada vez entiendo menos tu inolvidable explosión.

—Ah, ¿insistes en volver sobre ello? —preguntó ella fatigadamente—. Y, con tantas cosas como tienes en que pensar, ¿te resulta tan inolvidable?

—¡Huy, pero es que hubo una llama tan fiera en tu mirada…!

—Pues —dijo la señora Brook— ya ves que actualmente está extinguida por completo. —Ella había hablado con más tristeza que acrimonia, pero al siguiente instante su impaciencia tuvo un brote—: Hice volver a Nanda porque quise.

—Desde luego; pero lo que no discierno, ¿sabes?, es qué has ganado con ello desde entonces.

—¿Quieres decir que tan sólo he logrado que ella me odie aún más?

La propia impaciencia de Van, en el movimiento con que le volvió la espalda a su anfitriona, tuvo una eclosión aún más perentoria:

—Sabes que soy incapaz de querer decir nada semejante.

Ella guardó silencio unos instantes mientras tenía frente a sí la espalda masculina. Y replicó:

—A veces pienso en efecto que eres incapaz de nada directo y claro.

El movimiento de Vanderbank no había sido hacia la puerta, pero casi se llegó hasta ésta tras dedicarle a su anfitriona, al oír aquello, una intensa mirada. Entonces se detuvo en seco, empero, para atalayar unos instantes incluso más fijamente el sombrero que tenía en su propia mano; la consecuencia de lo cual a su vez fue que pasado un momento volviera a situarse ante el asiento de ella:

—¿No consideras que por mi parte ha sido directo y claro precisamente no haber venido durante tanto tiempo?

Otra vez ella tardó un poco en replicar.

—¿Es eso una alusión a lo que (con la pérdida de tu agraciada presencia) no he salido «ganando»? De todas formas —ella no le concedió tiempo para contestar—, seguro que te das cuenta de que eres ni más ni menos que igual de directo y claro que yo y de que ninguno de nosotros dos es una criatura de meros impulsos irreflexivos. A decir verdad hubo una época, ¿no es cierto?, en que cada uno de nosotros dos disfrutaba bastante con los oscuros abismos del otro. Si quisiera adularte —prosiguió— podría decir que, teniendo que dar vueltas y revueltas con tamaño compañero de oblicuidades, me arriesgaría a perderme en el laberinto. Pero ¿para qué imputar o recriminar? Por amor de Dios, no seamos vulgares; todavía, por mala que sea la coyuntura, no hemos llegado a *eso*. Yo *puedo* serlo, no cabe duda; algún día *debo* serlo: lo veo perfilarse ante mí en el infausto porvenir como un sino inevitable. Pero releguémoslo para cuando me haya vuelto vieja y horrible; ni una sola hora antes. Incluso ahora deseo vivir un poco. Así es que deberías dispensarme benévolamente… igual que yo hago contigo.

—¡Oh, ya sé muy bien —dijo Vanderbank elegantemente— que hay cosas que te abstienes de plantearme! ¡Demuestras tal tacto!

—Helo ahí. Y decididamente prefiero —continuó la señora Brook— que a eso lo denominemos delicadeza en vez de falsedad. Si consigues entender esto, tanto más que llevaremos adelantado.

—Lo que siempre entiendo mejor que nada —repuso— es la verdad general de que eres prodigiosa.

Acaso fue en cierto modo a guisa de alivio de la tensión como ella no dijo nada en contra de aquello:

—Así, por ejemplo, cuando *sería* tan fácil…

—…recoger estas últimas palabras mías, ¿verdad?, y analizar lo que implican, sin embargo te abstienes generosamente.

—¿Literalmente me recalcas mi oportunidad? ¡Eres *tú* quien es generoso! —dijo la señora Brook riéndose algo extrañamente.

—¿Ni siquiera te apetece preguntar —prosiguió él con un leve sonrojo— lo que sería *más* obvio y natural que desearas preguntar?

Interpelada sobre la cuestión de los deseos subyacentes, la señora Brook adoptó el decente recurso de parecer tratar de concederle a aquello el beneficio de todas las posibles dudas:

—¿Que si quiero, insinúas, averiguar antes de que subas lo que quieres *tú*? ¿Te sentirás muy decepcionado —inquirió— si digo que, dado que probablemente me enteraré, como solían decimos cuando niños, de «cada cosa a su debido tiempo», puedo esperar hasta que el esclarecimiento surja por sí mismo?

Vanderbank se demoró allí:

—¡*Eres* astuta!

—Tú sólo tienes que serlo más.

—Eso es muy fácil de decir. En todo caso me temo que no te lo pareceré —continuó tras un pequeño silencio— si yo te pregunto a ti para qué diantres (ya que Harold está logrando mantener tan quietecita a Lady Fanny). Cashmore sigue requiriendo los consejos de Nanda.

—¡Ah, averigualo! —dijo la señora Brook.

—¿No está a buen recaudo la señora Donner?

—Averigúalo —reiteró.

Vanderbank se había llegado hasta la puerta y tenía una mano en el picaporte, pero aún faltaba algo más:

—A duras penas supondrás, imagino, que Nanda ha acabado apreciándolo «por lo que él es».

—¡Averigúalo! —Y la señora Brook, que ahora se había puesto de pie, le volvió la espalda.

Él la atalayó un momento más, después se reprimió y la dejó.

XXXII

Ella se quedó sola durante diez minutos, al término de los cuales sus reflexiones —habría podido verse que eran profundas— fueron interrumpidas por la aparición de su marido. De hecho la interrupción no fue tan grande como si estos cónyuges no se hubieran reunido, como casi invariablemente se reunían, en silencio; de cualquier manera ella no hizo, al principio, más caso de su presencia que alargarle una taza de té acompañada por nada excepto nata y azúcar. Que ella no le dirigiera ninguna palabra, empero, implicaba que pensaba que él había entrado exclusivamente para tomar su refrigerio en menor medida que si le hubiese dicho: «Aquí tienes, Edward querido: tal como te gusta; de modo que tómalo y siéntate y quédate calladito». Ningún espectador digno de este nombre habría podido contemplarlos juntos durante más de un rato sin advertir que todo lo que, bajo la mirada de él o no, ella hacía o dejaba de hacer estaba fundamentado en un profundo conocimiento de los hábitos de él. Constituían, los hábitos de Edward digo, todo un capítulo aparte, en el que la señora Brook era absoluta maestra y en lo tocante al cual el único inconveniente era que por la propia naturaleza del caso buena parte del mérito de ella estaba predestinada a quedar oculta. Algunos de dichos hábitos eran tan peculiares que nadie salvo ella *podía* conocerlos y por lo tanto saber hasta qué recovecos había tenido que ahondar la sutileza femenina. Sin ir más lejos, uno de ellos era que así como a menudo él se volvía sumamente silencioso cuando más henchido estaba de noticias, del mismo modo cuando no tenía nada que contar siempre permanecía silencioso también: particularidad ésta engañosa, hasta no haberle cogido el tranquillo, para una mujer que en el último de estos dos casos habría podido entregarse a casi cualquier variedad comentarística.

—¿Qué opinas —dijo él por último— de que hoy haya dado señales de vida?

—¿El querido Van?

—Ah, ¿ha dado *él* señales de vida?

—Hace media hora, y preguntando por Nanda casi nada más abrir la boca. Lo he remitido al piso superior y está con ella en este momento. —Si Edward tenía sus hábitos ella también tenía los suyos; uno de los cuales, en conversación con él, si es que conversación podía llamarse, era nunca desvelar nada hasta que fuese estrictamente necesario. De esta suerte ella siempre tenía una o dos cartas de reserva, pues su lema era que jamás se sabía lo que podía suceder. Sin embargo ocurría que a veces él, como lo habría denominado ella, le ganaba por la mano.

—No está con ella en este momento. Yo acabo de estar con ella.

—¿Al final no subió? —La señora Brook se mostró enormemente interesada—. Me dejó, ya sabes, con ese propósito.

—¿Ya sé? ¿Cómo iba a saberlo? Yo la dejé a ella hace cinco minutos.

—O sea que se marchó sin verla. —La señora Brook estudió aquello—. Modificó su intención estando en las escaleras.

—Bueno —dijo Edward—, no sería la primera intención que ha sido modificada ahí. Prácticamente es lo único que un hombre puede modificar.

—¿Te refieres particularmente a *mis* escaleras? —preguntó ella con su extravagante aflicción. Pero entretanto había podido recapacitar—: Entonces, ¿de quién hablabas?

—De que el señor Longdon va a venir a tomar el té con ella. Ella ha recibido una nota.

—Pero ¿cuándo regresó a Londres el señor Longdon?

—Anoche, creo. Hace una o dos horas lo anunció la nota… traída personalmente y con la esperanza de que ella estuviera en casa.

De nuevo la señora Brook reflexionó:

—Me alegro de que sí esté en casa. El señor Longdon es un cielo. ¡Personalmente!… así debía de enviarle notas a mamá. Por nada del mundo telegrafiaría.

—Huy, muchas veces Nanda le ha telegrafiado *a él* —repuso el padre de la muchacha.

—Pues debería estar avergonzada. Pero ¿cómo —dijo la señora Brook— estás enterado de eso?

—Oh, yo siempre estoy enterado cuando estamos metidos en un asunto como éste.

—¡Sin embargo te quejas de la falta de intimidad de ella contigo! Y ahora resulta que sois como uña y carne.

Edward contempló esta acusación igual que contemplaba a todos los antiguos amigos: sin una señal —lo que se dice una señal— de reconocimiento.

—No recuerdo haberme quejado nunca de la falta de intimidad de nadie conmigo. No hay demasiadas cosas que nadie pueda contarme, a mi juicio, que no me hayan contado ya. ¿Qué supones que pretendo de las personas? Si yo, por mi parte, no consigo calarlas demasiado hondo, debí de quejarme de *eso*.

—Oh, pero sí que lo consigues —declaró la señora Brook—. Tú te crees que no, pero el hecho es que las calas muy, muy hondo. Siempre estás, como dije hace un momento, sacando a la luz algo que hayas pescado en alguna parte.

—Sí, y viéndote erizarte ante ello. Lo que saco a la luz es simplemente lo que las personas me cuentan.

Para la señora Brook esa restricción no ofreció, empero, dificultad alguna:

—¡Oh, pero me parece que con las cosas que actualmente las personas van contando por ahí…! ¿Qué más quieres?

—Bueno —y desde su asiento Edward atalayó el fuego unos instantes—, entonces la diferencia debe estar en las que te cuentan *a ti*.

—¿Cosas que son mejores?

—Sí: peores. Seguramente —prosiguió— lo que yo les doy…

—…¿no es tan malo como lo que les doy yo? Oh, cada uno de nosotros debe hacerlo como mejor sabe. Mas cuando te oigo decir —siguió la señora Brook— que alguna vez Nanda se ha permitido algo tan grosero como comunicarse con él por telegrama, nuevamente se me pasa por la cabeza que *yo* habría sido la más cualificada para tratar con el señor Longdon si no lo hubiese impedido su aversión hacia mí. —A estas alturas ella también estaba —aunque de pie— junto al fuego, que miró larga y fijamente igual que su marido—. *Yo* nunca habría telegrafiado. Habría puesto en práctica pequeñas delicadezas y detalles inesperados que a Nanda nunca se le han ocurrido.

—Desde luego ella no tiene las mismas ideas que tú —convino Edward.

—¡Es más sosa que una chimenea apagada, y en el fondo si no hubiera sido por mamá…! —Y ella volvió a abismarse en las razones de las cosas.

Por un instante el silencio de su marido pareció indicar cierta conformidad con aquella insinuación, pero incluso para esta aquiescencia hubo un límite:

—Tú logras muy bien, opino, que no se extinga lo logrado por tu madre. Pero ¿y si, como dices tú, tu madre *no* hubiera logrado…?

—Caray, jamás habríamos llegado a ninguna parte.

—Bueno, y ¿dónde estamos en estos momentos? Eso es lo que *yo* querría averiguar.

Siguiendo el curso de sus propios pensamientos, al principio ella no prestó atención a la pregunta de él:

—De no ser por su aborrecimiento, el señor Longdon me habría apreciado. —Pero con un suspiro regresó hasta la situación real—: Da igual. Debemos apañárnoslas con lo que tenemos.

—Y ¿*qué* tenemos? —insistió Edward.

Otra vez sin prestar oídos a la pregunta su esposa le volvió la espalda, aunque sólo para, tras haber dado algunos imprecisos pasos, tomar a él con renovado ímpetu:

—Si el señor Longdon está al caer, ¿puedes hacerme un favor? ¿Querrás regresar junto a Nanda (antes de que él llegue) y hacerla saber, aunque por supuesto no como si fuese de *mi* parte, que Van estuvo aquí media hora, se le dijo claramente que ella estaba en el piso superior y desocupada, y se marchó sin subir a verla?

Edward Brookenham no hizo ningún movimiento.

—¿No prefieres hacer eso tú misma?

—Si lo prefiriese —dijo la señora Brook— ya lo habría hecho. Sin duda la forma de que no parezca dicho de mi parte es no decirlo yo misma. Por lo demás, quiero quedarme aquí para ser la primera en recibirlo.

—Y ¿no puede ella saberlo más tarde?

—¿Después de que el señor Longdon se haya marchado? La finalidad es que ella lo sepa a tiempo para hacérselo saber *a él*.

Edward siguió hablando en dirección al fuego:

—Y ¿cuál es la finalidad de *eso*? —A ella la impaciencia, que se le acrecentó visiblemente, la hizo alejarse de nuevo; pero para cuando ella se detuvo junto a la ventana él ya había lanzado otra pregunta—: ¿Tantas prisas tienes de que ella sepa que Van no la quiere?

—¿Por qué las denominas prisas si llevo esperando aproximadamente un año? Nanda puede saberlo o no según se le antoje: puede saberlo en cuanto le dé la gana; si a estas alturas no lo sabe de sobra, es que es demasiado tonta para que ello pueda importar. Mi sola urgencia es por el señor Longdon. Ella le tendrá preparada la noticia cuando llegue.

—¿Quieres decir que Nanda se apresurará a contárselo?

Durante un momento, la señora Brook alzó la mirada hacia alguna elevada inmensidad:

—Se lo mencionará.

Su marido, por el contrario, con las piernas estiradas, miraba derechamente hacia la punta de sus botas.

—¿Estás segurísima? —Después, al no obtener respuesta, insistió—: ¿Por qué iba ella a hacerlo, si él no le ha contado *a ella*…?

—…¿el modo en que, según yo te conté a ti hace ya mucho, él le había planteado las cosas a Van? Entre ellos no han hablado sobre eso con palabras, no hay duda; pero me da en la nariz que, para comunicarse lo que sea, a ellos no les es tan necesario poner los puntos sobre las íes, querido mío, como a nosotros. Sin que le hayan dicho una sola sílaba, Nanda es consciente, en cada fibra de su pequeño ser, de lo que ha estado aconteciendo.

Edward dedicó un lapso todavía más prolongado a asimilar aquello.

—¡Pobrecita! —exclamó.

—¿Te parece tan pobre —preguntó la señora Brook— con lo muchísimo que se ha conseguido para ella?

—Conseguido ¿por quién?

Fue como si no hubiera oído la pregunta como ella tornó a hablar:

—Ella ha conseguido lo que toda mujer (joven o vieja) ansia.

—¿De veras?

El tono de Edward fue de asombro, pero ella se limitó a seguir adelante:

—Tiene un hombre para ella sola.

—Ah, pero ¿y si no es el indicado?

—¿Te parece tan sumamente contraindicado el señor Longdon? ¡Ojalá —declaró ella con un insólito suspiro— *yo* hubiera tenido un señor Longdon!

—Ojalá lo hubieras tenido, ciertamente. Yo no me lo habría tomado como a Van.

—Oh, hacía falta Van —replicó la señora Brook— para llevarlos a *ellos* a donde están ahora.

—Pero ¿*dónde* están ellos ahora? Helo ahí precisamente. En estos tres meses, por ejemplo, ¿en qué le ha aprovechado su mutua relación? —demandó Edward.

La señora Brook le dio vueltas a aquello:

—Aprovechado ¿a quién?

—Caray, uno está más interesado por sus propios retoños.

—Te diré que ella se ha convertido para él en lo que más anhelábamos: un objeto de compasión aún más intensa.

—¿Es eso lo que anhelabas que ella fuese?

Obviamente la señora Brook era, a su propio modo de ver, tan clara que su reduplicada expresión de impaciencia se mostró llena de inquina:

—¿Cómo puedes preguntar eso después de haber visto lo que hice…?

—…¿aquella velada en casa de la señora Grendon? Caray, es la primera vez que lo *he* preguntado.

La señora Brook se sumió en un silencio aún más denso.

—El señor Longdon la compadece por estar con *nosotros* —dijo por último.

Edward meditó:

—¿Por estar conmigo también?

—No tanto… pero de todas formas tú ayudas.

—Creía que creías que yo no había ayudado… aquella noche.

—¿En casa de Tishy? Oh, no fuiste un inconveniente —dijo la señora Brook—. Todo y todos ayudan. Harold manifiestamente —ella pareció representárselo todo—, e incluso los pobres niños, probablemente, un poco. Oh, en realidad todo el mundo —se puso más animada ante aquella visión—; es perfecto. Jane inmensamente, *par exemple*. Casi todos los demás que acuden de visita a esta casa. Cashmore, Carrie, Tishy, Fanny (¡benditas sean sus almas!), cada uno en su medida.

Bajo la influencia de esta exteriorización, Edward Brookenham se había levantado gradualmente de su

asiento y, cuando su esposa hubo alcanzado esa parte de su proceso que aparentemente iba a consistir en aportar pruebas, se situó frente a ella y de espaldas al fuego diciéndole:

—Y Mitchy, supongo.

Pero él se había desencaminado.

—No: Mitchy es distinto —replicó ella.

Él se maravilló:

—¿Distinto?

—No es una ayuda. Es toda una desventaja[20]. —Entonces, como el continente masculino declarara que esto *era* un enrevesamiento, ella agregó—: No es preciso que comprendas, basta con que me creas. Naturalmente, quien más colabora es Van en persona. —Esta última fue una aserción en virtud de la cual no se vio disminuido el fracaso intelectivo de él, así que ella remató la operación—: Porque no la aprecia.

La oscuridad de Edward al oír aquello no fue enteramente perplejidad, pero sí fue duda:

—¿Te gusta que no la aprecie?

—Cielos, no. No más de lo que le gusta *a él*.

—¿A Van no le gusta…?

—Huy, lo odia.

—Por supuesto yo no lo he interrogado —pareció Edward decir más para sí que para su esposa.

—Y por supuesto *yo* tampoco —repuso ella… decididamente, en este caso, no para sí—. Pero yo lo sé. Van la apreciaría si pudiese, pero no puede. Eso —concluyó la señora Brook— es lo que hace que sea inevitable.

En la seriedad de Edward finalmente apareció un nítido *pathos*:

—¿Inevitable que jamás se le declare?

—Inevitable que jamás el señor Longdon se desentienda de ella.

—Claro está que si ello *es* inevitable…

—¿Y bien?

—Pues que lo es. Pero claro está que si no lo es…

—¿Y bien?

—Pues que ella no tendrá nada. Nada excepto a *nosotros* —completó él reflexivamente—. A menos, ya sabes, que estés manejándolo todo sobre la base de una certidumbre…

—Precisamente sobre eso *estoy* manejándolo todo. No moví ni un dedo hasta cerciorarme de estar segura.

—¿«Segura»? —hizo de eco él con ambigüedad, mientras ante esto sus miradas se encontraban más largamente.

—Segura. Me cercioré de que el afecto del señor Longdon aguantaría contra viento y marea.

—Pero ¿cómo te cercioraste de que el de Van no?

—Da igual «cómo»… pero me cercioré todavía mejor. El de él no ha aguantado. —Ella lo dijo con gran sencillez, pero se dio media vuelta y echó a andar.

Durante unos momentos él la siguió con la mirada, y dijo:

—Nosotros no *sabemos*, al fin y al cabo, qué tal anda de patrimonio el viejales.

—Yo no sé a qué te refieres con eso de que «nosotros» no lo sabemos. Nanda sí lo sabe.

—Pero ¿dónde está el consuelo si no nos lo cuenta?

La señora Brook, que había tomado a encararlo, nuevamente le volvió la espalda:

—Espero que no olvides —comentó con suficiencia— que nunca la interrogamos.

—¿*Tú* nunca la interrogas? —Edward semejó melancólico.

—Nunca. Pero yo confío en ella.

—Sí —tomó a reflexionar él—, uno debe confiar en sus propios retoños. ¿Y Van? —inquirió a renglón seguido.

—¿Que si él confía en ella?

—Que si él sabe algo de la cifra global.

Ella titubeó:

—Todo. Es elevada.

—¿Eso te ha contado?

Ahora superlativamente impacientada, la señora Brook pareció objetar la mismísima pregunta:

—*A él* lo interrogamos todavía menos.

—Entonces, ¿cómo podemos saberlo?

Ella estaba cansada de tener que explicar:

—Porque precisamente por eso es por lo que Van lo odia.

No había límites, sin embargo, por lo visto, para la capacidad inquisitiva de Edward:

—Odia ¿el qué?

—Córcholis, odia no apreciarla.

Edward continuó dándole la espalda al fuego y orientó la inánime mirada hacia la comisa y el techo:

—Yo no pensaba que pudiera ser tan difícil apreciarla.

—Diablos, puedes ver que no lo es. El señor Longdon es capaz de lograrlo.

—No entiendo qué tiene de malo mi hija —insistió él apagadamente.

—¡Oh, pero eso no impedirá…! Afortunadamente, de todos modos, lo que tu hija tiene de malo constituye el origen de la mitad del interés del señor Longdon.

—Pero ¿*qué* es lo que mi hija tiene de malo? —requirió lóbrego.

Ella vaciló un instante, mas lo reveló:

—Soy *yo*.

—Y ¿qué tienes de malo «tú»?

Ella hizo, ante esto, un gesto que atrajo la mirada de él hacia la suya, y por un momento sonrió tenuemente a su marido:

—Eso es lo más bonito que me has dicho en toda tu vida. En toda, *toda* tu vida, ¿sabes?

—¿Lo es? —Ella le había puesto la mano sobre la manga, y él pareció casi turbado.

—Lo más bonito del mundo. Ten eso en cuenta y aun si sólo lo has dicho por casualidad no seas gracioso (tal como sabes que a veces *puedes* serlo) y te retractes. Ha estado muy bien. Es encantador, ¿verdad?, que nuestros problemas nos hagan estar más unidos. Ahora sube a verla.

Edward mantuvo un semblante extrañado, que no fue iluminado por aquella sucesión de comentarios, mas por último se puso en movimiento y no fue hasta que casi hubo llegado junto a la puerta cuando volvió a detenerse:

—Naturalmente, sabrás que le ha enviado un sinfín de libros a Nanda.

—¿El señor Longdon, últimamente? Oh sí, un diluvio, de tal forma que su habitación parece la trastienda de un librero; y todos ellos, en las más preciosas encuademaciones, ejemplares de las más clásicas obras inglesas. No sólo sé esto, naturalmente, sino que además sé (cosa que tú no) el porqué.

—¿«El porqué»? —hizo de eco Edward—. ¿Cuál puede ser sino que (a menos que le enviase dinero) es prácticamente la única gentileza que el señor Longdon puede mostrarle a distancia?

La señora Brook guardó silencio; luego espetó con un ligero suspiro reprimido:

—¡Helo ahí!

De todos modos esto lo hizo demorarse allá:

—Pero tal vez sí que le envía dinero.

—No. No ahora.

Edward ahondó:

—Entonces ¿es que expresa su afecto…?

—…¿únicamente mediante libros? —Era maravilloso (y ahora tuvo un visible efecto sobre él) cómo ella dominaba la cuestión—. Sí, ésa es la forma que adopta su delicadeza… en el presente.

—Y ¿no temes que en el futuro…?

—…¿el señor Longdon considere que con los libros ya habrá habido suficiente? No. Sólo son una propina.

Perceptiblemente aliviado, él alcanzó definitivamente la puerta, donde, no obstante, se detuvo otra vez:

—¿No crees que estaría bien que yo hablara con Van?

Se quedó mirando pasmada:

—¿Para qué?

—Caramba, para preguntarle qué propósitos tiene en definitiva.

—Como hagas algo tan atrozmente vulgar —contestó ella de inmediato—, abandonaré tu hogar en menos que canta un gallo. ¿Te crees capaz —preguntó— de encasquetarle a tu hija por la fuerza?

Claramente él no tenía preparado un informe sobre su creencia en sus propias capacidades, pero tuvo un recuerdo global que consiguió abrirse paso:

—Entonces, ¿por qué diantres nos cortejó?

—No lo hizo. Nosotros lo cortejamos *a él*.

—Y ¿por qué diantres…?

—Vaya —dijo la señora Brook, con decidido ánimo de concluir—, estábamos enamorados de él.

—¡Ah! —dijo Edward bruscamente. A estas alturas ya había abierto la puerta, y su exclamación era

parcialmente consecuencia de haber avistado a un criado que antecedía a un visitante. Su saludo al visitante antes de hacerse a un lado y retirarse fue, empero, sumamente breve y habría podido implicar que ya se habían visto ayer mismo—: ¿Qué tal te va, Mitchy? ¿Que si está en casa? ¡Oh, ya lo creo!

XXXIII

Muy distinta fue la acogida que la señora Brook le deparó al errabundo repatriado, a quien, en un brevísimo lapso, le dirigió todas las posibles expresiones de sorpresa y contento, aunque exteriorizando finalmente, a guisa de matización de esas palabras, su pesar ante el hecho de que él rehusara tanto participar del té como dejarla hacerle lo que ella denominó un «sitito para charlar» en el extremo que él prefería de su sofá. Él alegó sinceramente agitación y turbación, incluso le recordó que era dolorosamente tímido y que después de separaciones, complicaciones, independientemente de las incidencias que las caracterizaran, era muy consciente del polvo posado sobre las relaciones personales y que no podía ser limpiado de un solo soplido. Tan sólo rogaba que ella, acorde con su naturaleza, lo disculpara si él, mientras se movía por toda la estancia y cambiaba de ubicación sin cesar, salía a la superficie únicamente de manera fragmentaria y abrupta. Había tantas cosas que él deseaba saber que… vaya, teniendo en cuenta que habían arribado nada más que anoche, ya podía ella hacerse una idea. Había preguntas, según se hizo patente, que la señora Brook ansiaba formularle con casi parejo ardor, de tal suerte que al principio hubo incluso la impresión de que, por ambas partes, las confidencias fuesen a resultar asfixiadas por la curiosidad. Por último este desastre fue evitado gracias a que por parte de Mitchy el espíritu interrogador dio con una materia relativamente dúctil. A la postre ello fue bastante manifiesto cuando tras unas cuantas tentativas fallidas él espetó cordialmente:

—Y bien, ¿Van lo ha hecho o no?

No obstante, en el rostro de la señora Brook hubo algo que pareció contestar: «¡Oh, vamos: no te precipites, ya me entiendes!»; y en el movimiento con que volvió la espalda, algo que caracterizó el estado de la cuestión como no tan sencillo como él presuponía. Cuando él había rehusado tomar té ella había llamado para que se llevaran la mesa, y en este momento la campanilla fue contestada por la aparición de dos sirvientes. Pocas cosas tuvieron lugar a continuación, durante algunos minutos, mientras estuvieron presentes los criados; ella habló sólo cuando el mayordomo estaba a punto de dejar cerrada la puerta:

—Si el señor Longdon se presenta enseguida, hágalo pasar a la habitación del señor Brookenham si el señor Brookenham no está en ella. Si sí está, en vez de eso hágalo pasar al comedor, y en ambos casos infórmeme de inmediato.

El hombre se demoró impávido:

—¿Y en el caso de que el señor Longdon pregunte por la señorita Brookenham?

—¡No lo hará! —contestó ella con una sequedad ante la cual se retiró su interlocutor—. ¡Sí lo hará! —agregó después para Mitchy en un tono asaz distinto—. Es decir, ya sabes, *puede* perfectamente hacerlo. Pero ¡oh la sutileza de los criados! —suspiró.

Ahora Mitchy era todo atención:

—¿O sea que se halla en la capital el señor Longdon?

—Por primera vez desde que vosotros partisteis. Va a acudir de visita esta tarde.

—Y ¿deseas verlo a solas?

La señora Brook recapacitó:

—Me parece que no deseo verlo en modo alguno.

—Entonces, ¿eso de retenerlo en la planta baja…?

—Es para que no irrumpa de golpe y sorpresivamente. *A ti*, querido mío, es a quien deseo ver.

Mitchy desvió su mirada saltona:

—Vaya, no te lo tomes a mal si, en respuesta a eso, por mi parte digo que yo deseo ver a todo el mundo. Incluso ahora mismo habría podido departir un poco más con Edward.

A su intransferible manera, y con un lento ademán negativo, la señora Brook se puso radiante:

—*Yo* no habría podido. —Luego anudó todos los cabos tras un corto silencio—: Incluso se me ocurre que

si no te molesta…

—¿Qué, mi querida amiga —dijo Mitchy alentadoramente—, me ha molestado *nunca*? ¡Te aseguro —declaró riendo— que no he regresado para comenzar a sentirme molesto!

Ante esto súbitamente, dejando de lado cualquier otra cosa, ella lo asió con una mano:

—Amado Mitchy, ¿*eres* feliz?

Así permanecieron cara a cara durante un instante.

—Quizá no tanto como *tú* habrías procurado hacerme.

—Bueno, aún me *tienes*, ya lo sabes.

—Huy —dijo Mitchy—, tengo una gran cantidad de cosas. ¿Cómo, si lo miro detenidamente, puede un hombre de mi peculiar naturaleza (*es*, bien lo sabes, terriblemente peculiar) *no* ser feliz? Piensa, si para poner un ejemplo nos vemos obligados a ello, en la numerosidad de mis amistades.

Como consecuencia de reflexionar, la señora Brook pareció objetar aquello ligeramente:

—Sí…, pero no debemos vernos demasiado obligados a ello. Son las amistades quienes nos hacen sufrir. Si tú sufrieras yo no sería capaz de soportarlo.

Fue patente que ella infundió en Mitchy una nítida visión:

—Mi sufrimiento *sería* grotesco, ¿verdad que sí? Pero no tendrías por qué soportarlo. Yo me retiraría a algún sitio a sufrir a solas: a un cuarto oscuro, me parece, o a una isla desierta; en cualquier caso, adonde nadie lo viera. Por lo demás, ¿qué tiene de pernicioso —siguió— cualquier sufrimiento que no lo aburra a uno, tal como estoy seguro de que, por mucho que su apariencia pudiera parecerles vulgar a algunas otras personas, el mío no me aburriría a mí? Lo que yo haría en mi isla desierta o mi cuarto oscuro sería, creo, ni más ni menos que bailar y bailar gracias a la intensa emoción de ello… lo cual es exactamente la exhibición de ridículos brincos que con total resolución me preocuparía de ahorrarte. Te aseguro, querida señora Brook —concluyó—, que actualmente no me siento nada aburrido. Todo es tan interesante.

—¡Eres una bellísima persona! —intervino ella imprecisamente.

Pero él prosiguió sin prestarle atención:

—Lo que acababa de pasársete por la cabeza, ¿era quizá que *yo* lo viese?

Ella no retrocedió sino lentamente, empero, a aquel instante:

—¿Al señor Longdon? Pues sí. Ya sabes que *a mí* no puede soportarme…

—Sí, sí. —Mitchy se mostró casi entusiasta.

Esto ya había vuelto a desviarla:

—Eres realmente adorable. *Has* regresado idéntico que antaño. Yo tenía la comezón —explicó tras un momento— de desear que el señor Longdon fuese recibido…

—…¿sin incomodidad, por así decirlo, para él mismo ni para ti? En ese caso —dijo Mitchy, que visiblemente sintió que había completado con acierto las palabras femeninas—, me da la impresión de que sin duda alguna soy tu hombre. Es maravilloso regresar para sentirse útil.

Pero ella se mostró mucho más sombría al respecto:

—¡Oh, a lo que has regresado!

—Precisamente ahí quería yo llegar. ¿Es que Van sigue en el mismo punto en que lo dejé?

Ella guardó silencio.

—¿De veras pensabas que Van daría algún paso? —dijo por último.

Mitchy anduvo de un extremo al otro unas cuantas veces, hablando casi de espaldas:

—¡Caramba, con todos los acicates…! —Tras lo cual, mientras ella lo observaba, se plantó frente a ella con una pregunta—: ¿Ello está totalmente descartado?

—¿Acaso alguna vez estuvo «encartado»?

—Oh, me acuerdo de tu previsión, y eso, a mi juicio —alegó Mitchy—, constituye lo más asombroso de todo. Te digo que habría conseguido acicatearme *a mí*.

—¿Mi previsión? —La señora Brook reflexionó—: ¿Olvidas que asimismo tuve una previsión respecto de ti y no se cumplió?

—Ah, pero es que tú y yo no discrepábamos. Aquello no fue un desafío y una profecía. *A mí* me querías.

—¡Vaya que sí! —dijo con sencillez la señora Brook.

—Y no lo querías a él. Para *ella*, quiero decir. Y te aventuraste a exteriorizarlo.

Ella semejó sorprendida:

—¿*Hice* tal cosa?

De nuevo estaban cara a cara.

—¡Tu franqueza es divina!

Ella se maravilló:

—¿Quieres decir que lo fue incluso entonces?

Mitchy le sonrió hasta ponerse colorado:

—Ahora mismo es exquisita.

—¡Bueno —repuso ella seguidamente—, yo conocía a mi Van!

—*Yo* creía conocer al «tuyo» también —dijo Mitchy. Sus miradas se encontraron un instante, y agregó—: Pero no lo conocía. —Después exclamó—: ¡Cómo lo has manejado todo!

Ella apenas pareció comprender:

—¿«Manejado»? —Tras lo cual, en tono algo más acre, inquirió—: ¿Cómo sabes (puesto que has estado de jarana en lugares que daría mi cabeza por rever, pero que jamás reveré) lo que he estado haciendo?

—Bueno, es que pude contemplar, ya sabes, durante aquella velada en casa de Tishy, justo antes de abandonar Inglaterra, tu prodigioso arranque. Tuve una vislumbre de tu actitud, por así decirlo, y de tu estrategia.

Ahora los ojos femeninos estaban perdidos en la lejanía, y tras una pausa ella habló sin moverlos:

—Y, merced al mismo criterio, ¿acaso no tuve yo una vislumbre de la tuya?

—¿La mía? —Mitchy reflexionó, pero semejó dudar—: Hija mía, por entonces no tenía ninguna.

—¿Quieres decir que tu estrategia se ha configurado desde entonces?

Con la cabeza él ejecutó un resuelto ademán negativo:

—Te aseguro que continúo despistado y sin saber por dónde tirar. Jamás he tenido, y sigo sin tener, otra cosa que mi filosofía global, sobre la cual no me extenderé en este momento y de la cual, por lo demás, creo que ya has tenido, antaño y hogaño, tus atisbos. Lo que aquella noche discerní en ti fue un plan perfecto.

La señora Brook incurrió en otra de sus pueriles miradas fijas:

—¡Todo el mundo parece haber discernido algo aquella noche! De cualquier forma lo único que puedo decir —completó— es que en tal caso todos fuisteis muchísimo más perspicaces que yo.

—¿Fue simplemente un instinto ciego, no calculado ni premeditado? Quizá entonces, ya que ha surtido un éxito tan completo, dé igual la denominación. Estoy rendido de admiración, como te digo —manifestó Mitchy—, ante tu triunfo.

Ella pareció, como antes, inmensamente infantil, mas inmensamente seria:

—¿Qué entiendes tú por mi triunfo?

—Deja que más bien te pregunte (¿puedo?) qué entiendes *tú* por tu fracaso.

Ante esto la señora Brook, que había permanecido de pie durante algunos minutos, tomó asiento como dispuesta a responder a su interrogante. Pero al punto volvió a sumirse en cavilaciones:

—¿Has recibido frecuentes noticias de Van?

—Ni una sola.

—Y ¿has escrito?

—Ni una palabra tampoco. Lo dejé todo, como ves —sonrió Mitchy—, en *tus* manos. —Tras lo cual prosiguió—: ¿Te ha hecho mucha compañía?

Ella titubeó un minúsculo instante:

—La mínima posible. Pero da la casualidad de que acaba de estar aquí hace un momento.

Su visitante se acaloró visiblemente.

—¿Y me lo he perdido por muy poco? —preguntó.

Otra vez fue sumamente breve la pausa que ella realizó:

—No te lo habrías perdido si él *hubiera* subido.

—¿«Subido»?

—A ver a Nanda (que ahora tiene su propia sala de estar, como sabes), por quien él preguntó nada más entrar y en cuyo beneficio, no importa lo que pienses, estuve, al cabo de un cuarto de hora, te lo aseguro, perfectamente dispuesta a dejarlo libre. Él modificó su intención, sin embargo, y se marchó sin verla.

Mitchy mostró el más profundo interés:

—Y ¿qué lo hizo modificar su intención?

—Vaya, estoy procurando elucidarlo.

Él pareció contemplar aquel esfuerzo:

—¿Pero sin haber sacado nada en claro todavía?

—Cuando lo consiga, ya te lo diré.

Él hizo una tregua, una vez más, pero sólo un instante:

—¿No lo habrás urdido tú todo otra vez?

Ante esto ella se puso en pie con una extraña franqueza:

—Creo, ¿sabes?, que vas demasiado lejos.

—Caramba, ¿no acabábamos de dejar establecido —replicó él con prontitud— que ello es por completo instintivo e inconsciente? Si fue así aquella noche en casa de Tishy…

—Ah, *voyons, voyons* —espetó ella—; ¿qué fue lo que hice incluso entonces?

Ante algo en el tono femenino, él lanzó una carcajada:

—¿Te gustaría que volvieran a describírtelo?…

—No me da miedo.

—Bien, pues simplemente (públicamente) te reapropiaste de Nanda.

—Y ¿dónde está la monstruosidad de eso?

—En un pequeño punto muy preciso. En haber eliminado cualquier incertidumbre…

—Sí, ¿sobre qué? —Él había semejado no saber cómo expresarlo con precisión.

Mas lo expresó por último:

—Córcholis, sobre lo que aún podemos esperar hacer por ella. Gracias a tu cautela, había diversas posibilidades. —Entonces, como ella exhibiera el aspecto de intentar infructuosamente concretar por lo menos alguna, él siguió—: No las recuerdo una por una, pero todo el episodio fue lo bastante truculento para hacemos honor a todos.

Tras unos instantes ella le salió al paso, pero en un punto inesperado en absoluto:

—Discúlpame si apenas discierno en qué medida te hizo honor a ti. Por primera vez desde que te conozco, aspirabas a la decencia.

La sorpresa de Mitchy tuvo todas las trazas de ser auténtica:

—¿Te pareció decencia…?

Ya que así lo deseaba él, ella volvió a pensárselo:

—Huy, tu conducta…

—Mi conducta fue… mis circunstancias. ¿Llamas decente a *eso*? No, estás bastante equivocada. —Él hablaba, dentro de su amabilidad, con cierto matiz de reprobación—. ¿Cómo podría yo jamás…?

Pero aquello ya la había encaminado, y hacia un terreno más firme por el cual patentemente prefería ella transitar:

—¿Te van realmente mal las cosas, Mitch?

—Vaya, ya te contaré cómo me van. Pero no en este momento.

—¿En alguna otra ocasión? ¿Palabra de honor?

—Te enterarás de todo. Descuida.

Tenuemente ella sonrió:

—Será como en los viejos tiempos.

Él objetó aquello ligeramente:

—Para ti tal vez. Pero no para mí.

A pesar de lo que él dijo, quedó cautivada; y nuevamente la mano femenina casi lo acarició:

—Pero, como anticipo, dime: ¿tu coyuntura es muy, muy espantosa?

—Acaso sea eso precisamente lo que tendré que hacer que decidas tú.

—Entonces, ¿podré ayudarte? —preguntó ilusionada.

—Creo que sería muy propio de ti.

Al considerar lo que era muy propio de ella —extrañamente ello había sonado muy abarcador—, ella lo desasió levemente con un suspiro, si bien no por ello dejó de mirar en derredor como a la búsqueda de sugerencias:

—Jane, ya sabes, está histérica.

—Sí, Jane está histérica. ¡Eso es un consuelo!

En cierto modo continuaba aferrada a él:

—Pero ¿es el único que te queda?

Se mostró muy considerado y paciente:

—Puede que no.

—¿*Yo* soy otro hasta cierto punto?

—Hija mía, ya lo ves.

Sí, ella lo había visto, pero seguía lanzada:

—Y ¿vas a recurrir…?

—¿A qué? —preguntó él al parecer titubear ella.

—No quiero decir a nada violento. Pero ¿vas a contárselo a Nanda?

Mitchy se maravilló:

—¿El qué?

—Pues todo. Me parece, ¿sabes? —comentó meditabunda la señora Brook—, que ciertamente le estaría bien empleado.

El silencio de Mitchy, que se prolongó durante un minuto, semejó aceptar la idea, pero quizá no saber muy bien qué hacer con ella.

—¡Oh, me temo que yo jamás le estaré bien empleado!

Mientras él hablaba, reapareció el mayordomo; al ver al cual la señora Brook adivinó de inmediato:

—¿El señor Longdon?

—En la habitación del señor Brookenham, señora. El señor Brookenham ha salido.

—Y ¿adónde ha ido?

—Creo, señora, que tan sólo a comprar varios periódicos vespertinos.

Ella le dirigió una intensa mirada a Mitchy; luego le dijo al criado:

—Ruéguele que espere tres minutos; yo tocaré la campanilla. —En cuanto quedaron solos, otra vez se volvió hacia su visitante—: ¡No sabes hasta qué punto estoy a tu merced!

—¿A mi merced?

—Canastos, si el señor Longdon sube a verte.

Mitchy reflexionó:

—¿No sería mejor que bajara yo?

—No: podríais encontraros de vuelta a Edward. Si lo ves debes verlo aquí. Si no lo veo yo misma, es por una razón.

Mitchy tomó a sondearla:

—¿El hecho de que, tal como insinuaste hace un rato…?

—Sí: de que no le apetece escucharme. —Ella hizo una pausa, mas finalmente lo reveló—: No se cree ni una palabra…

—…¿de lo que tú digas? —Mitchy fue espléndido—. Entiendo. Y hay alguna cosa que quieres que le sea dicha.

—Sí, y estará dispuesto a aceptarla *de ti*. Sólo que depende de ti —continuó la señora Brook—, verdadera y honradamente, ya que habré de confiar en ti a ciegas, el transmitirla. Pero contigo el consuelo es que con seguridad lo harás si prometes hacerlo.

Mitchy quedó infinitamente impresionado.

—Pero que conste que aún no lo he prometido. Naturalmente no me es posible sin saber de qué se trata.

—Se trata de exponerle…

—Oh, ya veo: la situación.

—Lo que hoy ha ocurrido aquí. La inequívoca retirada de Van y cómo, habida cuenta del plazo transcurrido, finalmente ello nos hace ver dónde estamos. Naturalmente tú mismo —concluyó la señora Brook— te das cuenta de eso.

—¿Dónde estamos? —Mitchy anduvo hasta el extremo y volvió sobre sus pasos—. Pero, entonces, ¿para qué vino Van hoy? Si hablas de una retirada, ha tenido que haber un avance.

—Oh —dijo la señora Brook—, lo único que Van deseaba era no mostrarse demasiado brutal. Después de tan larga ausencia *podía* venir.

—Pues bien, si ha dejado claro no ser brutal, ¿en qué ha consistido la retirada?

—En no haber subido a ver a Nanda. Vino (abiertamente) a hacer eso, pero tras pensárselo mejor resolvió que no podía arriesgarse siquiera a ser cortés con ella.

Visiblemente Mitchy se había puesto más animado ante sus propias cavilaciones:

—Bien, y ¿qué representó la diferencia?

Ella se extrañó:

—¿Qué diferencia?

—Caramba, la de la consecuencia, como dices tú, de pensárselo mejor. Pensarse mejor ¿el qué?

—¡Huy —dijo de repente la señora Brook y como si fuese bastante sencillo—, *eso* sí lo sé! Ciertas sospechas.

—¿Acerca de quién?

—Caramba, acerca *de ti*, bobo. Acerca de que no hiciste…

—Y bien, ¿el qué? —perseveró él al quedarse callada.

—¿Cómo expresarlo? Lo mejor para ti mismo. Y acerca de que Nanda sea consciente de ello. ¿Es que no lo ves?

En el esfuerzo por verlo, o acaso realmente en el pleno acto de haberlo visto, el pobre Mitchy lanzó una mirada más saltona que nunca:

—¿Quieres decir que Van está *celoso* de mí?

Por muy acuciada que se viese, en el rostro masculino hubo algo que transitoriamente la hizo permanecer callada.

—¡Helo ahí! —logró ella exclamar, sin embargo, por último.

—¿De *mi*? —insistió Mitchy.

Lo que tan súbita y sorprendentemente había habido en el rostro masculino era el aspecto de lágrimas incipientes… ante la vista de lo cual, como a causa de una contrición no menos rauda, ella exhibió un precioso rubor.

—Helo ahí, helo ahí —repitió ella—. Me pides una razón, y es la única que se me ocurre. Claro está que si no te apetece —agregó— no hace falta que suba aquí el señor Longdon. Puede ir a ver a Nanda directamente.

Mitchy había vuelto otra vez la espalda como con el impulso de ocultar las lágrimas que habían asomado y que no habían desaparecido enteramente ni siquiera para cuando tomó a encararla:

—¿Nanda sabía que él iba a venir?

—¿El señor Longdon?

—No, no. ¿Ella esperaba que Van…?

—Mi querido amigo —gimió dulcemente la señora Brook—, ¿cuándo *no* ha estado esperándolo?

Durante unos momentos Mitchy miró intensamente hacia el suelo.

—Quiero decir, ¿sabe que él ha estado aquí y que no subió?

La señora Brook, desde donde estaba situada y a través de la ventana, miró más bien hacia el cielo:

—Su padre ya se lo habrá contado.

—¿Su padre? —se maravilló Mitchy abiertamente—. ¿Está *él* al corriente?

Ante esto la señora Brook guardó un silencio más prolongado.

—Das por sentado, supongo, Mitchy querido —dijo después trémulamente—, que yo lo he enredado…

—¿Enredado a Edward? —atajó él.

—No: eso por descontado. Enredado a Van con ideas…

De nuevo él recogió sus palabras:

—…¿acerca *de mí*? ¿Lo que tú llamas sospechas? —Él pareció sopesar la imputación, mas ello terminó, mientras con la mano se frotaba intensamente los ojos, en hastío y en la más cercana aproximación a la impasibilidad que había llevado a cabo jamás ante la señora Brook—. Da igual. El sino de todos es ser de uno u otro modo tema de ideas. Por tanto —siguió— haz subir aquí al señor Longdon.

Al punto ella tocó la campanilla:

—Entonces yo me voy a ver a Nanda. Pero no pongas esa cara de espanto —agregó mientras tomaba junto a él— ante lo que Edward o yo podamos hacer a continuación. Es sólo para avisarla de que enseguida subirá a verla el señor Longdon.

—Muy bien. Yo se lo aclararé a Tatton —repuso Mitchy.

Todavía, sin embargo, ella no se movió de allí:

—¿Algún día volverás a quererme?

Él casi tenía el aspecto, mientras esperaba que ella se retirara, de ser señor de la casa, pues ante él ella se había vuelto, mientras él estaba de pie de espaldas a la chimenea, tan humilde como una visitante de clase inferior.

—Oh, lo mismo que siempre. ¿Dónde está la diferencia? De hecho, ¿no se han multiplicado más bien nuestros vínculos?

—Así es como *a mí* me gusta figurármelo. Y puesto que convienes conmigo en que…

—¿Y bien?

—Pues en que en realidad Van, ya sabes, jamás lo *habría* hecho…

Misericordioso, recogió las palabras femeninas:

—…¿nadie ha salido perjudicado? —extrajo Mitchy la conclusión.

Esto la hizo permanecer aún inmóvil:

—Nanda será rica. A eso *sí* puedes contribuir, y es en realidad, puedo decírtelo ahora, *para* eso por lo que se me ha pasado por la cabeza que veas aquí a nuestro amigo.

Él conservó su actitud de espera:

—Gracias, gracias.

—¡Eres nuestro ángel de la guarda! —exclamó ella.

Ante esto él lanzó una carcajada:

—¡Aguarda hasta haber visto qué termina haciendo el señor Longdon!

Pero ella hizo caso omiso:

—Antes de irme quiero que entiendas que no he hecho nada pensando en mí sola. ¡Después de todo, Van…! —musitó.

—¿Y bien?

—Tan sólo me odia. No es como en tu caso —dijo ella—. A *él* lo he perdido de veras.

Durante un instante Mitchy, con los ojos en que habían asomado sus lágrimas, se abismó en contemplación del espacio.

—Decididamente ahora no puede, bien lo sabes, apreciar a *ninguno* de nosotros —declaró—. Se queda sin una fortuna.

—¡Helo ahí! —observó la señora Brook una vez más. Después cobró una relativa brillantez—: ¡Cuánto me alegra que *tú* no! —Él soltó otra carcajada, mas ella ya estaba dirigiéndose al señor Tatton, quien nuevamente había acudido ante el toque de campanilla—: Haga pasar aquí al señor Longdon.

—Entonces, ¿debo decirle que es a petición tuya? —preguntó Mitchy cuando se hubo retirado el mayordomo.

—¿Que seas tú quien lo recibe? Oh, sí. Él será el último en enojarse por ello. Pero hay una cosa más. —Esto fue algo a cuenta de lo cual inopinadamente ella tuvo uno de sus accesos de ansiedad—. Durante meses y más meses ha estado olvidándoseme preguntarte…

—Sí, ¿el qué? —preguntó él, al semejar ella misteriosa.

—Caramba, si finalmente Harold te devolvió, tal como me juró por su honor que lo haría, aquel billete de cinco libras…

—Pero ¿cuál, querida amiga? —Ahora pareció acudir en ayuda de Mitchy la conciencia de otras incongruencias distintas de aquellas que habían estado discutiendo.

—El que, hace ya eternidades, un día en que os habíais presentado aquí tú y Van, fue objeto de un chiste. Tú lo desembolsaste en broma, a guisa de «multa» por alguna cosa, y lo depositaste sobre esa mesita; tras lo cual, antes de poder darme cuenta de lo que hacías, antes de poder salir corriendo en pos tuyo, ya te habías marchado y lo habías dejado ahí de un modo absurdo. Por supuesto, al siguiente instante (y nuevamente antes de poder darme la vuelta). Harold ya se había apoderado de él, y en vano traté de obligarlo a devolvérmelo. Todo lo que obtuve de él…

—…¿fue la promesa de que se lo devolvería a su propietario original? —Hasta tal punto Mitchy había atendido bastante menos con sorpresa que con diversión, que al parecer había evocado la escena en un instante—. Oh, lo recuerdo muy bien; Harold no dejó de ajustar cuentas conmigo. No tienes que preocuparte por *eso*.

Ella lo atalayó desde la puerta que daba a la habitación contigua:

—¿Recuperaste cada penique?

—Cada penique. ¡Pero mira que molestarte en aclarar eso!

—Huy, yo siempre lo aclaro todo, ya sabes, *algún* día.

—¡Sí, eres de una rigurosidad…! Pero estáte tranquila. En Harold puede confiarse —prosiguió—, y lo cierto es que era mi propósito preguntarte por él.

Raudamente la señora Brook se entregó a ese punto:

—Oh, todo va bien.

Mitchy fue más específico:

—¿Lady Fanny…?

—Sí: se *ha* quedado por él.

—¡Oh —exclamó Mitchy—, ya sabía yo que lo lograrías! Pero silencio: ¡alguien viene! —Tras lo cual, mientras ella se desvanecía sin pérdida de tiempo, él regresó junto a la chimenea.

XXXIV

Para él transcurrieron diez minutos de charla con el señor Longdon al amor de la lumbre de la señora Brookenham sin encontrar el momento propicio para abordar el asunto que tan vivamente le fuera planteado en la entrevista precedente. Lo cierto es que de ninguna manera un intervalo menor lo habría habilitado para un tratamiento más directo de este problema, y al principio nada habría podido resultar más denodado que la intensidad de su esfuerzo por no mostrar impaciencia ante preguntas que constituían, por parte de una persona del estilo global de su anciano amigo, meras salutaciones y formalismos. Había un límite para la honesta alusividad con que, de acuerdo con la escuela de modales del señor Longdon, podía ser tratado un viaje por el extranjero, y Mitchy, sin duda, patentizó abundosamente que ninguno de sus frecuentes regresos había sido recibido por una curiosidad a un tiempo tan pormenorizada y tan discreta. Pertenecer a un círculo muchos de cuyos miembros podían hallarse en cualquier momento al otro lado del globo suponía inevitablemente caer en el hábito de hacer pocas preguntas, así como en el de compensar su poquedad a base de su desvergüenza. En resumidas cuentas este interlocutor, mientras en su fuero interno el delegado de la señora Brook meditaba acerca de todo lo que tenía entre manos, habló con cierta extensión y asaz encantadoramente —ya que ello no era sino tributo a una elemental cortesía— sobre las resonancias virgilianas de la Bahía de Nápoles. Al final, empero, se sobresaltó al dirigirle una mirada al reloj:

—Me temo que, aunque no haga su aparición nuestra anfitriona, no debo entretenerme. Yo también regresé nada más que ayer y tengo una cita (a la cual ya llego tarde) con la señorita Brookenham, quien ha tenido la amabilidad de convidarme a tomar el té.

La dividida atención, la expresa cortesía, el educado «la señorita Brookenham», la huida para no ver a la anfitriona: todas éstas fueron cosas que Mitchy supo asimilar raudamente, y en un santiamén ya le habían dado pie para no desaprovechar la ocasión.

—Entiendo, entiendo: voy a ocasionar que haga usted esperar a Nanda. Pero hay algo que voy a pedirle que acepte de mí como justificación de ello; lo cual es sencillamente que a fin de cuentas, como usted sabe (pues me parece que usted lo sabe, ¿no?), yo siento por ella casi tanto afecto como usted.

De improviso el señor Longdon había semejado aprensivo e incluso una pizca turbado, mas habló con la debida presencia de ánimo:

—Claro está que estoy perfectamente enterado de eso. Si usted no la hubiese apreciado tantísimo…

—¿Y bien? —dijo Mitchy al quedarse callado el otro.

—…yo jamás habría aceptado, el pasado año, la invitación de usted.

—¡Muchas gracias! —exclamó riendo Mitchy.

—Si bien lo aprecio a usted asimismo, y en extremo —completó el señor Longdon con seriedad—, por lo que usted es.

Mitchy realizó un ademán de gratitud, y dijo:

—Usted me aprecia más *por ella* que por cualquier otra persona *excepto* yo mismo.

—Lo expresa usted, creo, con acierto. Naturalmente no he tratado tantísimo a Nanda (si es que entre mi generación y la de ella, quiero decir, es posible una relación auténtica) sin enterarme de que actualmente lo considera a usted uno de sus más excelentes amigos, tratándolo, según se me antoja, con un grado de confianza…

Mitchy lanzó una carcajada de interrupción:

—…¿que Nanda no le otorga ni siquiera a usted?

Los colocados lentes del señor Longdon lo encararon:

—¡Ni siquiera! No me importa —continuó el anciano—, ya que se ha presentado la oportunidad, confesarle a usted con franqueza (y como de mi edad a la suya) todo el consuelo que obtengo de la

certidumbre de que en cualquier caso de necesidad o apuro ella podrá acudir a usted en busca de cualquier consejo o ayuda que el problema pueda requerir.

—¿Ella le ha contado que está segura de que permaneceré al pie del cañón? —preguntó Mitchy luego de un instante.

—No estoy convencido —repuso su amigo— de que me sea lícito siquiera aludir a nada que ella me haya «contado». Hablo de cosas de las cuales me he enterado por mi cuenta.

—En tal caso le agradezco su penetración más de lo que puedo expresarlo. La madre de Nanda, debo informarle —siguió Mitchy—, está con ella en este momento.

De un tirón el señor Longdon se quitó los lentes:

—¿Le ha pasado algo a Nanda?

—¿Que sea causa de la circunstancia que acabo de mencionar? —dijo Mitchy divertido ante su sobresalto—. No está enferma, que yo sepa, gracias al cielo, ni se ha roto una pierna. Pero algo, a pesar de todo, sí le ha pasado… que creo que me es lícito comunicarle. Para decirlo en una palabra, se trata de la razón, tal como suena, de que sea yo quien lo ha recibido a usted. La señora Brook me pidió que me quedase. Ella misma lo verá a usted en alguna otra ocasión.

El señor Longdon dudó:

—¿Y Nanda también?

—Ah, eso dependerá de ustedes mismos. Sólo que, mientras yo lo entretengo aquí…

—…¿ella comprende mi demora?

Mitchy reflexionó:

—La señora Brook ya se la habrá explicado. —Luego, como su compañero acogiera esto en silencio, inquirió—: ¿Ello no le agrada?

—¡Es que se me antoja que las explicaciones de la señora Brook…!

—…¿son muy raras a menudo? Oh, sí; pero Nanda, ya sabe, está familiarizada con esa rareza. Y la propia señora Brook, merced al mismo criterio —amplió Mitchy—, sabe (mejor que nadie) lo que con frecuencia puede opinarse de la misma. Precisamente tal es la razón de su deseo de que en esta ocasión usted recibiera explicaciones de una fuente que ella tiene la bondad de juzgar, a efectos del propósito que nos ocupa, superior. En cuanto a Nanda —concluyó—, no le parecerá tan infausta señal ser avisada de que nosotros estamos aquí reunidos.

—En efecto —convino el señor Longdon solícitamente—; difícilmente temerá que estemos tramando su ruina. Pero ¿qué es lo que le ha pasado? —requirió con mayor brusquedad.

—Pues —dijo Mitchy— es usted, pienso, quien tendrá que hallar la denominación exacta para ello. Estoy al corriente de que usted está al corriente de que yo he estado al corriente.

Con los lentes puestos otra vez, el señor Longdon titubeó:

—Sí, estoy al corriente.

—Y lo ha aceptado usted.

—¿Qué otra cosa podía hacer? Enfrentarme a tanta inteligencia…

—…¿estaba más allá de su alcance? Oh, no era mi inteligencia —dijo Mitchy—. Hay una mayor que la mía. Hay una mayor incluso que la de Van. He ahí la madre del cordero —continuó mientras su amigo lo miraba intensamente—. ¿No le agrada ni siquiera un poquito?

El señor Longdon se asombró:

—¿La existencia de tal elemento?…

—No: sencillamente la existencia de mi conocimiento del plan de usted.

—Supongo que por decencia estoy obligado a no olvidar la existencia de mi propio conocimiento del de usted.

Pero Mitchy pasó aquello por alto:

—¡Oh, yo tengo tantísimos «planes»! Siempre estoy ideando alguno nuevo y casi siempre poniéndolo en práctica… generalmente para abandonarlo considerándolo un fracaso. Sí, concebí uno hace medio año. Lo puse en práctica. Aún estoy poniéndolo en práctica.

—En ese caso espero —dijo el señor Longdon, con un optimismo algo impostado— que, invirtiendo la pauta habitual, sea un triunfo.

Fue aquél un optimismo, por cierto, que Mitchy fue capaz de igualar:

—¡Creo que promete! Pero incluso ahora tengo otro plan más, y es justamente el que una vez más estoy poniendo en práctica.

—¿Sobre mí? —Con cierta extravagancia el señor Longdon no dejó de sonreír.

Mitchy reflexionó:

—Vaya, sobre dos o tres personas, de las cuales usted *es* la primera con quien me toca enfrentarme. Pero debo empezar por obligarlo a confesar que está usted de acuerdo en que ella confía en nosotros.

—¿Nanda?

Tras un instante el plan de Mitchy había progresado visiblemente:

—Ambas: las dos mujeres que a la sazón están tan extrañamente reunidas en el piso superior. También la señora Brook ha de confiar en nosotros, inmensamente. Pero a usted no le importará eso.

El señor Longdon había recaído en una inquietud más espontánea que su expresión de un momento atrás:

—¡Ya iba siendo hora! Pero es que si Nanda no confiara en nosotros —prosiguió— su caso sería de veras lamentable. No tiene a nadie más en quien confiar.

—En efecto. —La anuencia de Mitchy fue articulada con gravedad—. Sólo a usted y a mí.

—Sólo a usted y a mí.

A cuenta de esto las miradas de los dos hombres se encontraron durante una pausa cancelada por último cuando Mitchy dijo:

—Nosotros debemos resarcirla de todo.

—¿Es ése su plan?

—Oh —dijo Mitchy con gentileza—, no se burle de él.

La melancólica mirada de su amigo tomó a envolverlo:

—Pero ¿qué *puede*…? —Entonces, como Mitchy exhibiera un semblante que pareció estremecerse con un tácito «¿Qué *podría*?», el anciano completó su objeción—: Piense en la magnitud de la pérdida.

—Huy, no sugiero ni por asomo —se apresuró Mitchy a responder— que no sea inmensa.

—A él ella lo ama de veras, ¿sabe usted? —dijo el señor Longdon.

Ante esto Mitchy lanzó una prolongada y amplia mirada saltona:

—¿Que si lo «sé»?… —protestó con la mayor delicadeza del mundo.

Su ironía había impresionado:

—¡Pues claro que lo sabe de sobra! Nanda y usted lo saben todo.

En esto hubo una nota que accionó un resorte, y Mitchy soltó una carcajada:

—¡Tiene gracia que me agrupe usted con ella! Pero en esto estamos todos juntos. En el caso de Nanda —agregó a continuación—, su amor *es* profundo.

Su compañero aceptó aquello:

—Profundo.

—Y sin embargo, extrañamente, no es abyecto.

El anciano se extrañó:

—¿«Abyecto»?

—Me refiero a que no es digno de lástima. A su modo —amplió Mitchy—, es algo venturoso.

También esto, aunque más bien pesarosamente, el señor Longdon supo aceptarlo:

—Sí… a su modo.

—Cualquier pasión tan grande, tan absoluta —insistió Mitchy—, es (consumada o inconsumada) una vida plena. —El señor Longdon pareció tan interesado que su compañero de visita, patentemente conmovido por lo que ahora era una súplica y una dependencia, se volvió aún más benigno, o por lo menos más entusiasta, tratando de insuflar confianza—: Ella no está *demasiado* hundida.

—¡Oh, es tan orgullosa!

—Ya, pero eso es una ayuda.

—¡Ah, no para *nosotros*!

Esto paralizó a Mitchy, pero su ingenio no pudo menos que salir a flote:

—De *una* manera sí: nos fuerza a percibir que el deseo de «resarcirla» es… vaya, primordialmente en aras de *nuestro* alivio. Si ella «confía» en nosotros, como dije hace un momento, no lo hace para *eso*. —Como su amigo semejara aguardar a oír más, fue con decidido gozo como seguidamente él demostró ser capaz de superar la última dificultad—: Lo que ella confía en que hagamos —¡oh, vaya si Mitchy lo había desentrañado!— es dispensarlo a *él*.

—¿Dispensarlo? —Aquello no impidió que el señor Longdon continuara sombrío.

—Benévolamente. Eso es todo.

—Pero ¿en qué consistiría dispensarlo malévolamente? Me da la impresión de que él ya está (desde cualquier perspectiva) fuera de nuestro alcance. Ha rehusado el pacto.

El señor Longdon le había imprimido a aquello un tono que de súbito hizo que Mitchy pareciera derrumbarse bajo una más acibarada conciencia del asunto:

—*Ha* rehusado el pacto —hizo de eco con tristeza.

Nuevamente un poco desconcertado, su compañero lo escrutó; entonces espetó con impaciencia:

—Se lo ruego, dígame qué es lo que ha pasado.

Velozmente el otro se sobrepuso:

—Pues que él estuvo aquí, tras una larga ausencia, hace un rato y como si hubiese venido expresamente a verla. Pero tras permanecer media hora se marchó sin haberlo hecho.

Persistió el escrutinio del señor Longdon:

—¿Pasó la media hora con su madre a cambio?

—Oh, «a cambio»… a duras penas se trató de eso. En todo caso él descartó su propio plan.

—Y ¿cuál había sido su propio plan?

—¡Habla usted como si él tuviera tantos como yo! —repuso Mitchy—. La verdad es que en cierto modo los tiene —continuó como para sí mismo—. Pero son de un tipo diferente —le dijo al señor Longdon.

—¿Cuál había sido su propio plan? —se limitó a repetir, no obstante, el anciano.

Ante esto la confesión de Mitchy pareció explicar su previa elusión:

—Nunca lo sabremos.

El señor Longdon vaciló:

—¿No se lo contará *a usted*?

—¿A mí? —Mitchy guardó silencio—. Menos que a nadie.

Entre ellos ya habían circulado muchas cosas que no habían sido puestas en palabras, y evidentemente otra más, al sentir de ambos, circuló durante el instante que siguió a aquello.

—Mientras estuvo usted en el extranjero —indagó el señor Longdon al poco—, ¿recibió noticias de él?

—Ni una. Ni tampoco escribí una sola palabra.

—Igual que yo —dijo el señor Longdon—. Ni he escrito ni he recibido noticias.

—Ah, pero el caso de usted será diferente. —El señor Longdon, como con el estallido de una agitación controlada hasta ahora, abruptamente había vuelto la espalda y, con el consabido balanceo de sus lentes, había comenzado a deambular casi tempestuosamente—. Usted *recibirá* noticias.

—Seré inquisitivo.

—Ah, pero lo que Nanda quiere, ya sabe, es que no lo sea usted en exceso.

El señor Longdon divagó meditabundo:

—¿En exceso?…

—A fin de dispensarlo, como íbamos diciendo, benévolamente.

Durante un instante el más maduro de los dos no dijo más, pero al cabo repuso sarcásticamente:

—De hecho, ¿a ella le gustaría que yo lo obsequiara a él con algo?

—¡Seguramente!

—¿Con dinero?

Mitchy sonrió:

—Un bonito regalo[21]. —Otra vez permanecieron cara a cara entregados a intercambios mudos—. ¡Ella no quiere que *él* se quede sin…! —Ante esto, empero, el señor Longdon tomó a apartarse mientras la mirada de Mitchy lo seguía—. ¿Acaso ello no suministra una especie de vislumbre de lo que ella debe de sentir…?

Se calló, nuevamente desentrañándolo todo, con el efecto de que su amigo regresó junto a él para imbuirse de su esclarecimiento:

—¿Qué es lo que la suministra?

—Caramba, el hecho de que nosotros sigamos apreciándolo.

El señor Longdon se quedó mirando pasmado:

—¿*Usted* sigue apreciándolo?

—Si yo no siguiese apreciándolo, ¿cómo habría de molestarme…? —Pero a mitad de la frase Mitchy se contuvo bruscamente.

Tras otra mirada, su compañero le puso una mano aquietante sobre el hombro:

—¿Qué es lo que lo molesta?

—¿De *él*? ¡Oh, nada! —Nuevamente era dueño de sí—. Hay personas así: grandes casos de privilegio.

—¡Él *es* uno de ellos! —musitó el señor Longdon.

—Helo ahí. Van por la vida, de uno u otro modo, salvaguardados. No pueden dejar de agradar.

—¡Oh —se lamentó el señor Longdon—, si no hubiera sido por eso…!

—Cautivan, subyugan a todo el mundo —insistió Mitchy—. Es el terror sagrado.

Durante un breve rato ambos compañeros semejaron permanecer sumidos juntos en tal elemento; tras lo cual el más maduro volvió la espalda una vez más y pareció continuar caminando envuelto en él.

—¡Pobre Nanda! —llegó seguidamente a los oídos de Mitchy, en un suspiro lejano. Ante esto Mitchy se dirigió imprecisamente hacia la chimenea, en cuya contemplación se abismó hasta que otra vez oyó la voz del señor Longdon—: A fin de cuentas yo ya lo sabía de sobra. Para cerciorarme es para lo que he regresado aquí. Aquella velada, antes de que partiese usted, en casa de la señora Grendon…

—¿Y bien? —Mitchy había vuelto a reunirse con él.

—Pues que me hizo ver claramente el futuro. En aquel momento ya era demasiado tarde.

Mitchy convino con énfasis:

—Demasiado tarde. Ya Nanda era inaceptable para él.

Aunque el señor Longdon hubo de apurar esto, por lo menos lo apuró con calma, contentándose con decir tras unos momentos:

—¿Y la madre de Nanda no lo *es*?

—Oh, sí. Por completo.

—Y ¿lo sabe la señora Brook?

—Sí, pero no le importa. Se parece a usted y a mí. La señora Brook «sigue apreciándolo».

—Pero ¿de qué le servirá eso a ella?

Mitchy esbozó un encogimiento de hombros:

—¿De qué nos sirve a *nosotros*?

El señor Longdon reflexionó:

—Nosotros por lo menos podemos sentir respeto hacia nosotros mismos.

—¿*Podemos*? —sonrió Mitchy.

—Y *él* puede sentir respeto hacia nosotros —prosiguió su amigo, cual si no lo hubiera oído.

Mitchy pareció casi objetar aquello:

—Él debe de pensar que somos «desusados».

—Vaya, la señora Brook es peor que «desusada». Él no puede sentir respeto hacia *ella*.

—¡Ah, acaso sea eso precisamente —exclamó riendo Mitchy— lo que más le aprovechará a ella! —Fue la primera vez, empero, que el señor Longdon exteriorizó no comprenderlo ni siquiera tras un minuto; conque él pasó a otro punto con la mayor celeridad posible—: Si usted decide hacer algo, ¿puedo participar yo?

—Pero ¿qué puedo hacer? Si se acabó, se acabó.

—Para *él*, sí. Pero no para ella ni para usted ni para mí.

—¡Huy, yo no estaré aquí mucho tiempo! —dijo el anciano fatigadamente, volviéndose al siguiente instante hacia la puerta, donde se había presentado uno de los lacayos.

—Saludos de la señora Brookenham, disculpe el señor —anunció este emisario—, y que en este momento la señorita Brookenham está a solas.

—Gracias; ahora mismo subo.

El criado se retiró, y durante un momento volvieron a encontrarse las miradas de los dos visitantes, tras lo cual Mitchy escudriñó en derredor en busca de su sombrero:

—Adiós. Me marcho.

El señor Longdon lo contempló mientras, habiendo hallado ya el sombrero, el otro escudriñaba en derredor en busca de su bastón.

—¿Desea participar usted en *todo*?

Sin contestar, Mitchy adecentó el sombrero; luego repuso:

—Usted dice que no estará aquí mucho tiempo, pero no la abandonará.

—Oh, me refiero a que no duraré eternamente.

—Bueno, ya que usted mismo lo ha expresado así, a eso es a lo que me refiero yo también. Le aseguro que *yo* no me desentenderé de ella. Y si puedo ayudarlo…

—¿Ayudarme? —atajó el señor Longdon, mirándolo intensamente.

Esto lo hizo sentirse un poco violento:

—¡Ayudarlo a ayudarla, ya me entiende usted…!

—Es usted maravilloso —repuso el señor Longdon enseguida—. Hace año y medio deseaba ayudarme a ayudar al señor Vanderbank.

—Bueno —dijo Mitchy—, no me dirá usted que no lo he hecho.

—¡Pero sus planes de ayuda son de una munificencia!

—Oh, ya le he hablado sobre mis planes. —Mitchy casi pidió disculpas.

El señor Longdon titubeó:

—En tal caso espero no resultar indiscreto si identifico su casamiento como uno de ellos. ¡Y el hecho de que, habiendo asumido ya una responsabilidad tan grande, parezca usted francamente dispuesto a otra…!

—…¿me caracteriza como una especie de monstruo de generosidad? —Mitchy estudió aquello con semblante ruborizado—. En inmensa medida las dos responsabilidades son una y la misma. Lo único que mi casamiento ha hecho es, por así decirlo, acercarme más a Nanda. Mi esposa y ella, ¿no lo entiende?, son especiales amigas.

Por su parte, el señor Longdon se puso una pizca pálido; miró hacia el suelo con bastante fijeza:

—Entiendo, entiendo. —Entonces alzó la mirada—: Pero (para un viejo como yo) es todo tan extraño.

—*Es* extraño. —Mitchy habló con gran dulzura—. Pero es espléndido.

Con la cabeza el señor Longdon hizo un gesto negativo que a la vez fue triste y amargo:

—Es deplorable. ¡Pero *usted* es espléndido! —agregó en un tono distinto mientras salía de la estancia presurosamente.

Libro Décimo

NANDA

XXXV

Durante un par de semanas tras el regreso del señor Longdon, Nanda Brookenham había tenido mucho en que pensar; pero en ella se había materializado en alto grado, visiblemente para nosotros, una animación de actividad durante la tarde de cierto viernes de junio. Estaba en inhabitual posesión de aquel acogedor aposento donde últimamente había transcurrido gran parte de su vida: la redecorada y reacondicionada estancia, en el piso superior, donde había disfrutado de una debida dosis tanto de soledad como de compañía. Pasando revista a los objetos que la circundaban, prestó una especial atención a su acusada riqueza bibliográfica: durante cinco minutos cambió repetidamente la ubicación de varios volúmenes, trasladó a mesas algunos que estaban en anaqueles y reorganizó estanterías teniendo en cuenta el efecto de la disposición de los lomos. Lo cierto es que en todos los sentidos estaba flagrantemente enfrascada en una cuidadosa meditación sobre el efecto, la cual incluso, de no haber prevalecido aquí inveteradamente la ley de una extremada naturalidad, habría podido rastrearse en los mismísimos detalles de su propia apariencia personal. En resumidas cuentas se presentía «compañía» en el ambiente y se advertía expectación en el cuadro. Las flores sobre las mesitas ostentaban una escrupulosa lozanía agudamente reverberada en el centelleo de brinquiños y reproducida a su vez en la exuberancia leve de cojines sobre sofás y la estudiada altura de persianas en fenestras. Los amigos en las fotografías se hallaban en especial sumamente preparados, todos ellos con pequeños rostros intensos, que en todos los casos daba la casualidad de que estaban orientados hacia la puerta. Acaso el par de ojos más dilatados fuese el del querido Van, presente bajo un cristal pulido y dentro de un marco de tafilete de cantos dorados claramente relacionado, aun a simple vista, con Piccadilly y la Navidad, y que perceptiblemente aguzó la mirada ante la apertura de la puerta, el anuncio de un nombre por parte de un lacayo y la entrada de un caballero notablemente parecido a él exceptuando que las pequeñas disimilitudes favorecían al caballero. No llevaba Vanderbank ni diez segundos en la habitación y ya había dejado claro haber acudido para mostrarse considerado. Por consiguiente la consideración se convierte para nosotros, merced a un rápido giro del espejo que refleja la escena entera, en la nota alta del concierto: una consideración que casi inmediatamente inundó el lugar —llegando a excluir cualquier otra cosa— de una cordial voz campechana, una brillantez de buenos gestos y buenas intenciones, una risa constante aunque a veces quizá inoportuna, casi una sobreabundancia de interés, desatención y movimiento.

Lo primero que dijo el joven fue que estaba enormemente contento de que ella le hubiese escrito:

—Pienso que ha sido inmensamente amable por tu parte. —Y dicho pensamiento semejó precisamente, mientras él hablaba, una flor de la omnipresente lozanía… como si esa amabilidad que él había mencionado hubiese sido tan sumamente grande que ni corta ni perezosa lo había conformado todo a su imagen y semejanza—. Lo único que me afligió una pizca —continuó— fue que confesaras haber vacilado mucho y aguardado antes de decidirte a escribir. Espero firmemente, ¿sabes?, que nunca vuelvas a hacer nada por el estilo. Siempre que experimentes el más tenue deseo de verme (por causa de no importa qué motivo), siempre que exista la más mínima cosa de cualquier tipo que yo pueda hacer por ti, te prometo que no me será fácil perdonarte si guardas las distancias. Se me hace que cuando las personas llevan tanto tiempo conociéndose como tú y yo hay por lo menos un placer que pueden permitirse. Naturalmente me refiero —amplió Van— al de ser desenvueltas y abiertas y espontáneas. Hay excesivas relaciones en que uno no lo es, en que ello no compensaría, en que de hecho la «desenvoltura» sería la mayor de las trabas y la «espontaneidad» la mayor de las falsedades. No obstante —siguió mientras de improviso se incorporaba para cambiar el sitio donde había depositado su sombrero—, en realidad no sé por qué estoy alegando con tamaña insistencia, pues soy por entero consciente de que a mí personalmente no me es preciso. Uno se pasa la mitad del tiempo alegando más o menos en su propio favor, ¿verdad? De todas formas no me equivoco, creo, respecto que lo que es acertado *contigo*. Y contigo una mera insinuación es bastante, estoy

seguro, acerca de lo que es acertado conmigo. —Él había estado mirando en todo su derredor mientras hablaba y dos veces se había cambiado de asiento; conque estuvo bastante en consonancia con su admirativa atención generalizada el que la siguiente impresión que verbalizó se hubiese impregnado de un cierto aire de trascendencia—: ¡Vaya flores tan extraordinariamente preciosas tienes y qué bonito lo has dejado todo! Siempre estás alterando algo; las mujeres están constantemente cambiando la disposición del mobiliario. Si a uno le da por entrar a oscuras (no importa lo bien que se conozca el sitio), termina sentándose sobre un sombrero o un perrito. Pero claro está que me dirás que uno no entra a oscuras, o al menos que si uno lo hace se habrá merecido cualquier cosa con que se tropiece. Sólo que ya sabes de qué manera algunas mujeres adornan sus habitaciones. Me siento obligado a decir que *tú* no estás, ¿verdad?…, no estás ansiosa por colocar tiestos en las ventanas y media docena de persianas. ¿Por qué *tendrías* que estarlo? ¡*Ya* tienes un buen montón de cosas de que preciarte! —Tras esto él se puso de pie por tercera vez, como para dominar mejor la escena—. A lo que me refiero es a aquel sofá (que, dicho sea de paso, es de asombrosa calidad): ¡mi querida Nanda, vaya si lo desplazas de punta a cabo! Desde luego estaba colocado *aquí* la última vez, ¿no?, y este objeto estaba puesto allá. La última vez (quiero decir la última vez que subí a esta habitación) fue hace la mar de tiempo; ¿*cuándo* fue, por cierto? Pero ya ves que *he* subido a esta habitación y me acuerdo. Y ahora tienes muchísimas más cosas. Estás acumulando riquezas. ¡En verdad el incremento del lujo…! Menuda cantidad de libros… ¿los has leído todos? ¿Dónde has aprendido tantísimo sobre encuademaciones?

Él continuó parlando; alzaba objetos y los depositaba; Nanda permanecía sentada en su sitio, donde su propia quietud, concentrada e incolora, suponía un contraste con el casi ruborizado desparpajo masculino, y parecía únicamente aguardar, medio en sorpresa y medio en abandono, a que se agotara el caudal del flujo de la inventiva de él de tal modo que, habiendo ocasionado ella misma esta reunión, a ella le fuese factible hacer un poco más para estar a la altura de la misma. De ningún modo ocurrió, empero, que la presencia masculina cesara de predominar en medida alguna… pues hubo momentos durante los cuales el rostro femenino, lo único que en ella se movía, girando con los giros de él y mirando hacia donde él miraba, ofreció de veras un as pecto incompatible con nada que no fuera una sumisión a casi cualquier contingencia. Tal vez expresaba un deseo de que la cháchara masculina durara y durara, una aceptación de cualquier tratamiento de la ocasión o cualquier interpretación, o carencia de interpretación, de su propio acto que pudiera hacerlo sentirse cómodo, quizá inclusive una resignada previsión del acaecimiento final de algo que la dotaría, dejándola vencida y desorientada, del aspecto de haberlo hecho acudir simplemente para mirarlo. Cierto es que acaso ella era consciente de una incapacidad de mirarlo lo bastante poco para poder hacer patente que lo había convocado para un muy distinto propósito. Él, teniendo entretanto de esta guisa la situación en sus manos, advirtió encima de la chimenea otra alteración más:

—Antiguamente había ahí un enorme grabado… ¿no es cierto?, una escena de hacia 1850… en casa teníamos cantidad de ellos: tal o cual lugar «como era otrora». Y ahora has puesto ese espejo francés tan estupendo. Conque ya lo ves. —Él habló como si de alguna manera ella lo hubiera contradicho, siendo así que en realidad él no le había dejado tiempo para contestar siquiera una sola pregunta. Mas rompió a hablar de nuevo sobre la belleza de las flores—: Las tienes maravillosas; ¿de dónde las sacas? Flores y cuadros y… ¿cuáles son las otras cosas que las personas poseen cuando son dichosas y elevadas?… libros y pájaros. Deberías tener un pájaro o dos, si bien seguramente te parecerá que, con el ruido que formo, valgo yo sofito por una docena de ellos. ¿No había alguna muchacha en alguna novela (no era de Scott; ¿de quién era?) que padecía tribulaciones y tenía una jaula en la ventana y a quien se asocia con álsine y virtud? No era Esmeralda… lo que Esmeralda tenía era un caniche, ¿no?… ¿o es que confundo varias heroínas distintas? Tú misma vives aquí arriba como una heroína; te sientas elevada en tu torre o en… ¿cómo se dice?… el bastión de tu morada. En verdad dominas el panorama, ya sabes: la gran ciudad corrupta, el prodigioso cielo londinense y los monumentos que se recortan contra él; ¿o estoy haciéndome otra vez un lío con Zola? Debes de disfrutar de los crepúsculos, ¿a que sí? No, ¿qué estoy diciendo? Aquí estás orientada hacia el norte, claro está. Bueno, pues me parece que son casi lo único de que no disfrutas. Por otra parte no es sólo porque me das envidia por lo que me siento un miserable. Habría debido enviarte algunas flores. —Súbitamente él sufrió un acceso de pánico, echando luego hacia atrás la cabeza a causa de una ocurrencia repentina—: ¿Por qué diantres cuando recibí tu nota no hice por una vez en la vida algo realmente airoso? Me limité a apreciarla y contestarla. Y heme aquí. Pero no te he traído nada. Ni siquiera te he traído una caja de dulces. No soy un hombre de mundo.

—En su mayoría las flores que hay aquí —dijo finalmente Nanda— proceden del señor Longdon. ¿No te acuerdas de su jardín?

Reaccionando prontamente, Vanderbank lo evocó:

—Cielos, sí; ¿verdad que era encantador? Y aquella mañana que tú y yo pasamos allí —él se tomó gran cuidado de mostrarse natural respecto de aquello— charlando a la sombra de los árboles.

—Tú habías salido para estar tranquilo y leer…

—Y tú acudiste junto a mí para agasajarme. Caramba, recuerdo —prosiguió Van— que sostuvimos una sustanciosa charla.

Aquella charla, según dio a entender el semblante de Nanda, se había vuelto borrosa para ella; pero había otras cosas distintas:

—Ya sabes que el señor Longdon es un gran jardinero… quiero decir realmente uno de los más grandes. Su jardín es como una cena en una casa donde la persona (la persona de la casa) es un experto y se esmera a fondo.

—Entiendo. Y te envía platos del menú.

—Muy a menudo: todas las semanas. Es decir: ahora que él está en la capital, su jardinero es quien lo hace.

—¡Cuán amable por parte de ambos! —exclamó Vanderbank—. Pero es que el jardinero (aquel individuo extraordinariamente alto de luenga barba roja) era casi tan agradable como su señor. Sostuve charlas también *con él*, y recuerdo cada palabra que me dijo. Recuerdo que me contó que hacías preguntas que evidenciaban que eras «muy empollona». Pero es que me parece que en ninguna parte yo había visto jamás un personal tan majo… quiero decir como el grupo de que nuestro amigo se ha rodeado en su residencia en el pueblo. Es una muy buena señal a favor de un hombre: sirvientes agradables; siempre me lo ha parecido así, ¿y a ti? Los del señor Longdon (y sin necesidad de que abran la boca; simplemente por la índole de la traza y de las maneras que exhiben) me parecen una especie de coro de alabanzas. Igual que los de Mitchy en Mertle, por lo que recuerdo —siguió divagando Van—. Mitchy es la clase de persona de quien podría esperarse que los tuviera horrorosos, pero me acuerdo de haberle dicho que uno casi se sentía como si fuese *con ellos* con quienes uno había venido a alojarse. Buena señal, buena señal —repitió bienhumoradamente—. Me siento obligado a decir, ¿sabes? —continuó en esta vena—, que tienes una estupenda aptitud para relacionarte con personas que hacen agrada ble la vida a los demás. Ahora bien, por cierto, ¿está aún en la capital?

Nanda vaciló:

—¿Te refieres al señor Mitchy?

—Huy, *él* está, eso sí lo sé: hace dos noches lo vi; y, por cierto asimismo (que no se me olvide), quiero hablarte de su esposa. Pero a quien no he visto, ¿sabes?, es al señor Longdon… lo cual es verdaderamente lamentable. Dos, tres veces, creo, me he escabullido de mis obligaciones en momentos como éste; pero no hay manera de localizar al viejo diablo a ninguna hora. ¿A qué hora lo visitas *tú*… o siempre es él quien viene aquí? Por supuesto me doy cuenta de que tienes la habitación organizada para recibirlo a él. Cuando pregunté en su hotel a qué horas suele *estar*, que me aspen si el fulano no me respondió: «¡Con gran frecuencia, señor, hacia las diez!». Y cuando le pregunté: «¿Las diez de la noche?», casi se rió en mis narices por mi ingenuidad respecto de una persona de tales hábitos. Entonces ¿*cuáles* son sus hábitos actualmente, y qué lo obligas a hacer? Hablando en serio —prosiguió Vanderbank—, *es* cierto que lo lamento mucho y me pregunto si, en cuanto halles una oportunidad, tendrás la bondad de contarle que me has oído decir esto mismo y que aún me propongo darle caza. Igual que a los Mitchy, a decir verdad. Por unas cosas o por otras no pude, la otra noche, entre tal cantidad de invitados, acceder a ellos. Pero durante toda la cena estuve sentado frente a Aggie, lo cual me refresca la memoria. Me gustaría que me contaras infinidad de cosas sobre Aggie, por favor. Por mi parte es infame no ir a visitarla. Pero todos saben que estoy atareado. ¡Estamos hasta el cuello!

—No soy capaz de expresarte —dijo Nanda— cuán considerado me parece por tu parte haber logrado hallar, con tantas cosas como tienes que hacer, un rato para *esto*. Pero por favor, sin más demora, déjame decirte…

A efectos prácticos, empero, él no estaba dispuesto a dejarla decirle nada; hasta ese punto su casi agresivo optimismo cordial se aferraba a alusiones de corto alcance.

—No afirmes eso, por favor. Por tu parte es sumamente encantador encontrar un hueco para verme a mí. Además me hace buen provecho verte *a ti*. Excelente provecho. Y me impresionó que me escribieses… oh, de veras. En ello afloró toda suerte de antiguas cosas. —Entonces rompió a hablar otra vez sobre sus libros, uno de los cuales tenía cogido en la mano desde hacía varios minutos—: Observo que te gustan las colecciones… y, mi querida muchacha, palabra de honor, por lo que veo, *grandes* colecciones. ¿Qué es esto? «Vol. 23: Los Poetas Británicos». Es delicioso el Vol. 23; háblame del Vol. 23. ¿Estás muy puesta en los Poetas Británicos? Pero ¿dónde diablos, asombrosa criatura, encuentras tiempo para leer? *Yo* no encuentro

ninguno… lo cual es verdaderamente siniestro. En Londres uno recae en el analfabetismo y la barbarie. Me veo precisado a cultivar un falso brillo para disimular en conversación mi cada vez más alarmante incultura: en verdad me abochornaría en grado sumo contemplar a otras personas *no* escandalizarse ante ella. ¡Pero instrúyeme, instrúyeme! —insistió alegremente.

—Los Poetas Británicos —contestó de inmediato Nanda— me fueron regalados por el señor Longdon, quien me ha regalado todos los libros buenos excepto unos cuantos (los que están ahí en la fila de arriba) que me han sido regalados en diferentes épocas por el señor Mitchy. El señor Mitchy me ha enviado también flores, al igual que el señor Longdon. Y esta tarde (ya que hemos hablado sobre si los he visto) tengo cita con ambos; no con los dos juntos, sino con el señor Mitchy a las 5.30 y con el señor Longdon a las 6.30.

Ella había hablado como con deliberada celeridad, compensando a base de una veloz exposición completa de su propio caso lo que todavía no le había sido posible decir. Asimismo fue patente que se disponía a proseguir con más; pero con una carca jada su visitante actual ya había recogido sus palabras:

—¡*Has* planificado tu jornada a lo grande y nos manejas como si fuéramos los trenes de una compañía de ferrocarriles! —Él consultó su reloj—. En tal caso, ¿podrás concederme atención *a mí*?

—Me parece que debería replicar: «¿Podrás concedérmela *a mí*?». Pero aún no son las cuatro y media —siguió Nanda—, y aunque desde luego tengo algo muy especial que decirte, ello no exigirá mucho tiempo. Hasta las cinco no se sirve el té, y cierta mente has de quedarte hasta esa hora. Yo ya te había escrito cuando cada uno de los dos, por idéntico motivo, me propuso esta tarde. Mañana ambos se marchan de la capital para pasar fuera el fin de semana.

—Ah, entiendo… y antes tienen que verte. ¡Vaya influencia ejerces, te darás cuenta, sobre la conducta de la gente!

Ella persistió tan literal como chistoso se mostraba él:

—Vaya, todo se juntó por casualidad, pero no importaba, puesto que, cuando yo te había pedido, ¿recuerdas?, que escogieras el momento, te habías decantado, porque te venía mejor, por esta hora relativamente temprana.

—Oh, perfectamente. —Pero otra vez él sacó su reloj—. Tengo un encargo que cumplir, malhadadamente (ése era mi propio motivo), en el otro extremo del mundo; el cual, por cierto, según me temo, no me permitirá quedarme a tomar el té. Mi té es irrelevante. —El reloj volvió a su bolsillo—. Lamento decir que debo marcharme antes de las cinco. De todas formas ha sido fabuloso volver a verte.

Él estaba de pie mientras hablaba y, aun cuando había estado de pie la mitad del tiempo, sus últimas palabras produjeron la impresión de que fuera a encaminarse casi inmediatamente hacia la puerta. Con ellas pareció quedar mucho más de relieve que hasta ahora que en verdad se sentía lo bastante turbado para necesitar ayuda, y sin duda fue la medida que tras un instante ella le tomó a esto lo que habilitó a Nanda, con una serenidad inimitable, para llevar un poco más a su propio terreno la situación. Tal serenidad le fue claramente infundida por una rápida percatación de que la misma era la mejor ayuda que podía ofrecerle a él. ¿Albergaba él un terror interior que explicaba su nerviosismo exterior, la incoherencia de una locuacidad destinada, según todo indicio, a detener un avance de la muchacha en cualquier dirección? En cualquier caso él no había hecho más que fomentarlo permitiendo que su propia simpatía precautoria lo hubiese hecho quedar mucho más indefenso. De hecho, ¿adonde había supuesto que ella quería ir a parar, y qué de entre todo lo que ella era capaz de hacer por él podía ser realmente tan hermoso como esta oportunidad de aquietar su confusión e intensificar, tanto como ello fuese factible, esa exquisita autosatisfacción que lo invadiría al convencerse de haberse enfrentado de un modo galante y caballeroso a un delicado trance? Inducirlo a la torpeza o al desconcierto era como inferir una desfiguración o una herida, conque al cabo de un minuto, durante el cual la expresión del rostro femenino se tomó una especie de extasiada contemplación de su presente oportunidad, ella logró ofrecer el aspecto de haber intercambiado su función con la de él y de que ambos estuvieran actuando de consuno precisamente a fin de que él —no ella— fuese dejado en la estacada con la mayor suavidad.

XXXVI

—Pero de cierto no vas a marcharte ya mismo —insinuó ella—. ¿Para qué diantres, entonces, supones que he apelado a ti?

—Santo cielo, no: tengo tiempo de sobra. —Él se dejó caer, riéndose de pura ansiedad, directamente en otro asiento—. Eres endiabladamente fascinante. ¿O sea que se trata de una «apelación»? —Aun habiendo planteado esta pregunta firmemente, él apenas fue capaz todavía de concederle una oportunidad de contestar—: Es sólo que me pones un poco nervioso con tu informe de todas las personas que van a dejarse caer por aquí. Y hay —continuó sin pérdida de tiempo— una cosa más: quiero abordar el meollo ahora mismo, no sea que nos interrumpan. Toda la gracia está en verte a solas de esta forma.

—¿Es *eso* el meollo? —preguntó Nanda con gravedad aprovechando que él tomaba aliento.

—Es parte de él; opino que verte así, te lo aseguro, es encantador. Pero lo que he querido decir (si haces el favor de dejarme, ya sabes, intervenir en la conversación) es lo que ya te he sugerido a ese respecto: que casi malogra mi placer que no dejes de recordarme que una afortunada ocasión como ésta (afortunada *para mí*, pues ya te veo venir) es para ti únicamente un asunto de negocios a fin de cuentas. ¡Ai diablo con los negocios! Bueno, no me apuñales con ese abrecartas. Ya escucho. ¿*Cuál* es el gran asunto? —Entonces, puesto que durante un instante pareció como si se hubiesen volatilizado, precisamente en el momento de mayor necesidad, las palabras que ella tenía preparadas, una vez más él sacó partido de su ventaja—: Oh, si hay alguna dificultad en ello, olvídalo: lo echaremos en saco roto. En todo caso hay algo (déjame decir esto) que *sí* me gustaría que no dejaras de recordarme: antes de marcharme quiero que me hayas iluminado el problema de la pequeña Aggie. ¡Oh, hay también otros problemas respecto de los cuales te considero una inmejorable fuente de informaciones curiosas! No obstante, ya los abordaremos uno por uno: el siguiente en alguna otra ocasión. Siempre me da la sensación de que manejas los hilos de un buen montón de pequeños dramas extraños. Tenme reservado algo bueno para cuando volvamos a vemos. En este preciso momento *la* cosa es el perfil del asunto de Mitchy. Servidor se preocupa por el querido Mitch lo suficiente para adivinar que servidor caminará más sobre seguro con la ayuda de una orientación o dos. De hecho, quiero abrir tu grifo hasta el límite.

—Ah, pero resulta que la cosa que se me ha metido en la cabeza decirte —replicó ahora Nanda bastante plácidamente— no tiene absolutamente nada que ver, te lo aseguro, ni con Aggie ni con el «querido Mitch». Si lo que quieres es no oírla, si lo que buscas es alguna forma de escabullirte, por favor créeme que *ellos* no te servirán de nada. —A decir verdad sucedía que ella era consciente de haber dado por fin con el tono adecuado. Nada salvo la convicción de ello habría podido hacerla agregar tras un momento—: ¿De qué diantres, señor Van, tienes miedo?

Pues bien, para certificar que *era* el tono adecuado bastó un único pequeño instante: un instante, debo apresurarme a especificarlo pese a todo, lo suficientemente grande a despecho de su pequeñez para abarcar la más larga mirada que hubiesen intercambiado jamás, por cualquier razón, estos amigos. Fue una de esas miradas —no tan frecuentes, hay que reconocerlo, como a menudo la musa de la Historia, que aun en el mejor de los casos se sirve de constantes atajos, se ve obligada a hacemos creer por culpa de sus condiciones laborales— que después de que han venido y se han ido se percibe no sólo que han transformado las relaciones sino además que han clareado absolutamente la atmósfera. Ciertamente ayudó a Vanderbank a encontrar la respuesta:

—Tan sólo tengo miedo, creo, de tu conciencia.

Lo cierto es que durante aquel intervalo él había resultado más ayudado que ella:

—¿Mi conciencia?

—Medítalo (tranquila y relajadamente) y algún día lo entenderás. No hay ninguna prisa —insistió—, ninguna prisa. Y cuando lo hayas entendido, no es preciso que tu existencia se te convierta en algo

abrumador por causa de ninguna ficticia obligación de comunicármelo. —Oh, cuán considerado se mostraba: más considerado que nunca en este momento—. El quid está, ya ves, en que *yo* no tengo conciencia. Tan sólo me preocupa mi diversión.

Ante esto intercambiaron una segunda mirada, asimismo decididamente reconfortante, aunque devaluada, valga la expresión, por la anterior, que a su modo ya había agotado por completo las posibilidades de las miradas.

—Oh, a mí también me preocupa *mi* diversión —dijo Nanda—, y por muy poco que en ciertos aspectos te lo parezca, precisamente esto, te ruego que lo creas, sí que es diversión y lo demás son cuentos. Lo que hay en el fondo de mi apelación —continuó— es una charla que sostuve con mamá no hace mucho.

—Huy, sí —repuso Van con interés brillantemente ruborizado—. ¡Ahí es nada —exclamó riendo— la diversión que puede extraerse de «mamá»!

—Oh, no era exactamente en eso en lo que pensaba. Pensaba en la diversión que ella misma pueda estar todavía en condiciones de obtener. Ahora mismo la mía consiste, ¿no te das cuenta?, en discernir cómo suministrársela. Por descontado, para mí es un poco difícil —prosiguió la muchacha— explicarte exactamente a qué me refiero.

—¡Oh, pero para mí no es nada difícil comprenderte! —En su cordialidad Vanderbank habló como si de hecho no se tratara más que de un quítame allá esas pajas—. Llevas a tu madre en tus pensamientos. Eso se parece muchísimo a lo que yo entiendo por tu conciencia.

Nanda tuvo un nuevo titubeo, pero esta vez aparentemente desprovisto de penalidad alguna.

—¿Ya no *aprecias* a mamá? —logró espetar en todo caso—. Debo decirte —añadió enseguida— que aunque he aludido a mi charla con ella como lo que finalmente me movió a escribirte, ella no me sugirió en lo más mínimo que te planteara esta pregunta. Te la planteo —aclaró— por mi cuenta y riesgo.

La aclaración, en su calidad de coda introducida sin una pausa, manifiestamente mejoró la coyuntura —y asimismo sobre la marcha— para Vanderbank. Éste se recostó en su asiento con una complacida, una resueltamente gozosa percepción de aquella combinación:

—¡Sois una familia adorable!

—Pues bien, si mamá es adorable, ¿por qué abandonarla? No me importa admitir que eso fue lo que, el día a que me refiero, ella me transmitió tener la impresión de que habías hecho… pero sin sugerir tampoco (ni por asomo, por favor créelo) que yo debiese hacerte ningún tipo de escena a cuenta de ello. Como es natural, de entrada ella sabe perfectamente que no resultaría de ninguna utilidad nada parecido a una escena. Ni aunque te lo propusieras podrías afirmar —insistió Nanda— que *esto* es una. Ella no nos va a oír (¿o acaso sí?) destrozar el mobiliario. Durante un tiempo creí que no estaba a mi alcance hacer nada en absoluto, y esa idea me dejó medio muerta de preocupación. Entonces repentinamente se me ocurrió que estaba a mi alcance hacer exactamente lo que estoy haciendo en este momento. Hace un rato dijiste que nosotros (tú y yo) nunca debemos ser otra cosa que desenvueltos y abiertos. Fue lo que yo también me dije a mí misma: ¿por qué no? Por lo tanto heme aquí ante ti tan espontánea como un catarro de vuestro superior. Sencillamente te interrogo… incluso te presiono. Es porque, como dijo ella, prácticamente has cesado de venir. Naturalmente sé que todo cambia. Es la ley… ¿cómo se dice?… «la gran ley» de no sé muy bien el qué. Sobreviene todo tipo de cosas, las cosas tocan a su fin. Ella ha perdido más o menos a Mitchy a causa de su casamiento. No quiero que lo pierda todo. Sé fiel a ella. Lo que en realidad quería decirte (por echarlo afuera de una vez) es que no creo que sepas de veras cuán endiabladamente te aprecia. Espero que no te parezca «indiscreto» manifestar tal cosa. Nunca se sabe… pero no me importa demasiado si te lo parece. Supongo que *sería* indiscreto si se me ocurriera manifestarte que creo firmemente que está enamorada de ti. No es que, si a eso vamos, a papá le importase ello: ello le importaría, como dice él, un pepino. Así pues —ella sostuvo su discurso extraordinariamente—, puede concedérsete cualquier provecho que mi información te haga; aunque esto, seguramente, sí que suena indecoroso. Da igual… con tal que produzca algún efecto sobre ti. Es lo único que deseo. Cuando pienso en ella, ahí abajo en el salón, muy a menudo prácticamente sola en la actualidad, me siento como si apenas fuera capaz de soportarlo. Es tan dolorosamente joven.

Por lo menos esta vez el discurso femenino, mientras desarrollaba una cláusula tras otra, lo sumió en un completo silencio, si bien tras una plena intuición de la dirección en que ella se encaminaba dejó de mirarla a los ojos y se limitó a permanecer sentado mirando fijamente hacia el dibujo de la alfombra. Incluso cuando finalmente habló, ello fue sin alzar la mirada:

—¡Desde luego eres, como solía decir ella misma, la hija moderna! Hace falta esa tipología para proponerse hacer carrera de los progenitores.

—Huy —dijo Nanda con gran sencillez—, no se trata precisamente de una «carrera», ¿verdad?, eso de…

salvar una vieja amistad; pero sí puede consolar un poco, ¿no?, de la pérdida de una. En todo caso yo quería no tener que reprocharme no haber hablado antes de que fuese demasiado tarde. Por supuesto no sé qué ha estropeado vuestra relación, o si de hecho ha habido algo que la haya estropeado. Me da igual, de todos modos, *qué* haya sido: no ha podido ser nada demasiado malo. Arréglalo, arréglalo… perdónalo. No insinúo que en ello haya una carrera *para ti* más de lo que la hay para ella; pero es algo que está ahí. Sé cómo debo de sonar: de lo más paternalista y atosigante; pero quien nada aventura, nada obtiene. No *puedes* saber cuánto significas para ella. Para ella significas más, lo creo firmemente, de lo que nadie ha significado *nunca*. Odio dar la impresión de intrigar respecto de ella a sus espaldas; así que lo expondré de una vez por todas. En una ocasión dijo, hablando de ello con una persona que luego me lo contó a mí, que tú habías hecho por ella más que cualquier otra persona, porque eras tú quien realmente la había estimulado. *Eras* tú: lo hiciste. Yo misma lo vi en su momento. Era muy pequeña, pero *podía* verlo. Me dirás que yo debía de ser un monstruito espeluznante, y probablemente lo era y ahora estoy haciendo honor a tan prometedor carácter. Ello no obsta para que servidora opine que cuando una persona ha estimulado y puesto en marcha a otra persona…

—…¿esa persona debe asumir las consecuencias —completó Vanderbank— y acompañar hasta el final del camino a la otra persona? —Ahora él era capaz de salirle perfectamente al encuentro y procedió a hacerlo admirablemente—: Hay mucho de verdad en lo que dices, lo admito, lo admito. Me siento obligado a decir que no sé muy bien qué fue lo que hice: uno hace estas cosas, no hay duda, en una bonita inconsciencia; a decir verdad, yo habría jurado que ocurrió exactamente a la inversa. Pero te aseguro que acepto todas las consecuencias y todas las responsabilidades. Si tú no sabes qué ha estropeado nuestra relación puedo afirmar que *yo* tampoco. No puede ser algo grave; ya lo hablaremos. No quiero decir tú y yo (*tú* no debes preocuparte más), sino ella y su inconsciente infiel. *No* he estado viniendo muy a menudo, ya lo sé —siguió su curso Vanderbank plácidamente—. Pero hay una marea en los asuntos de los hombres… y de las mujeres también, y de las muchachas y de todo el mundo. Tú sabes lo que quiero decir, lo sabes por experiencia propia. El quid está en que (¡benditas sean las almas de vosotras dos!) uno no abandona a tu madre: uno no *puede* ni aunque quiera. Es absurdo hablar de eso. Nadie ha hecho tal cosa en la vida. Ella es algo que está ahí, como la luna o Marble Arch. Yo no digo, fíjate —explicó con sinceridad—, que todo el mundo la *aprecie* en igual medida; eso es otra historia. Pero nadie que alguna vez la *haya* apreciado puede permitirse volver a pasarse sin ella durante una larga temporada. Hay demasiadas personas tontas, demasiadas compañías aburridas. Eso, en Londres, puede encontrarse a troche y moche; por el contrario, la inteligencia de tu madre siempre alcanzará una cotización elevadísima. Uno puede charlar con ella en busca de algo radicalmente distinto. Es magnífica, magnífica, magnífica. Por lo tanto, mi querida muchacha, tranquilízate. Tu madre es una estrella fija.

—Oh, bien sé que lo es —dijo Nanda—. *Tú* eres…

—…¿quien puede no ser más que un meteorito errátil? —Siguió sentado y le sonrió—. Entonces te prometo que tus palabras me han frenado en mi trayectoria. Me has detenido lo mismo que Josué detuvo el sol. —Tras esto él se puso en pie, pero, como para compensarlo, continuó tanto más cordialmente—: ¿Dices que ella es «joven»? Se trata de algo que no tiene parangón. Ella es la juventud. Ella es *mi* juventud… lo *fue*. Y, si hallas la ocasión —concluyó—, explícale de mi parte que, si *realmente* quiere saberlo, tiene reservada mi ancianidad. Es lo bastante inteligente, ya sabes —y Vanderbank, riendo, se dirigió a por el sombrero—, para comprender lo que le digas.

Nanda asimiló esto con la debida atención; ahora ella también estaba en pie.

—Y además es tan preciosa —declaró.

—¡Endiabladamente guapa!

—No lo digo, como suele decirse, ya sabes —insistió la muchacha—, *porque* sea mamá, pero cuando hacemos salidas sociales pienso frecuentemente que dondequiera que ella esté…

—…¿no hay nadie que, si bien se mira, le llegue a la altura del zapato? —recogió con ardor Vanderbank sus palabras—. Oh, lo mismo opina todo el mundo, y de hecho la apreciación que servidor hace de las cosas encantadoras que, en ese sentido, son tan intensamente propias de ella, apenas puede referirse a las mismas con la suficiente reverencia. Y además, mecachis, ella tiene vislumbres… que no son cosas que se vean todos los días. Tiene sorpresas. —Casi se le quebró la voz de pura vividez—: Tiene un estilo peculiar.

—Vaya, me alegro de que la aprecies de veras —repuso Nanda con seriedad.

Ante esto él volvió a encararla abiertamente, y el transitorio silencio masculino hizo que ello resultase aún más directo.

—Me gusta, ¿sabes?, casi tanto como me haya gustado cualquier otra cosa jamás, esta formidable idea tuya de abogar por su soledad y su juventud. No pienses que no te hago justicia al decir (lo cual es decir

mucho) que tu idea es no menos encantadora que graciosa. Y ahora adiós.

Él había extendido la mano, mas Nanda titubeó:

—¿No te quedas a tomar el té?

—Mi querida muchacha, no puedo. —Él pareció sentir, no obstante, que debía ser dicho algo más—: Volveremos a vemos. Pero se aproximan las fechas, ¿no?, del desperdigamiento general.

—Sí, y espero que este año —respondió ella— tengas unas buenas vacaciones.

—Oh, nos veremos antes de eso. Haré lo que pueda, pero palabra de honor que intuyo, ¿sabes? —dijo riéndose—, que un repaso como el que me *has* dado me durará mucho tiempo. Algo imponente. —Volviendo a extender la mano, agregó a continuación—: Y tú, ¿tienes algún plan?

Tantos, habríase dicho, que a ella no le hizo falta tiempo de meditar.

—Me atrevería a decir que estaré fuera una buena temporada.

Él se asombró francamente:

—¿Con el señor Longdon?

—Sí… con él casi todo el tiempo.

Él volvió a titubear:

—¿Realmente durante un largo periodo?

—Un periodo muy, muy largo, espero.

—¿Tu madre vuelve a mostrarse deseosa?

—Huy, por completo. Y ya ves que ése es el porqué.

—¿El porqué? —Ella no había dicho nada más, y él no alcanzó a comprender.

—El porqué de que no debas dejarla demasiado sola. ¡*No* lo hagas! —espetó Nanda.

—No lo haré. Pero —añadió a renglón seguido— hay una o dos cosas.

—Y bien, ¿cuáles son?

Con cierta seriedad él expuso la primera:

—¿Al final ella no piensa tratar a los Mitchy?

—Tampoco demasiado. Por supuesto ahora eso se ha vuelto algo muy diferente.

Vanderbank vaciló:

—Pero no *para ti*, sospecho… ¿o acaso me equivoco? ¿Tú tienes intención de verlos?

—Huy sí…, espero que vengan al pueblo.

Él se apartó algunos pasos… no en dirección a la puerta.

—¿A Beccles? Extraño lugar para ellos, ¿no crees?

Él había planteado la pregunta como en broma, pero Nanda se la tomó en serio:

—Oh, no cuando han sido invitados de un modo tan, tan hermoso. No cuando él desea tanto su presencia.

—¿El señor Longdon? Entonces, ¿eso se mantiene?

—¿«Eso»? —Se había quedado desconcertada.

—Me refiero a la amistad del señor Longdon… con Mitchy.

—En la medida en que *es* una amistad.

—Pero ¿no me habías dicho, por cierto —y él tomó a consultar su reloj—, que precisamente están a punto de presentarse los dos juntos?

—Oh, no especialmente juntos.

—¿Primeramente Mitchy a solas? —preguntó Vanderbank.

Ella esbozó una sonrisa que fue tenue, que fue ligeramente extraña:

—A menos que te quedes para hacemos compañía.

—Gracias; imposible. ¿Y después el señor Longdon a solas?

—A menos que se quede Mitchy.

Él hizo una nueva pausa; finalmente comentó:

—Al final no me has hablado sobre la florescencia de su esposa.

—¿Cómo voy a hacerlo si no me dejas tiempo?

—Entiendo; claro que no. —Durante un instante él semejó experimentar el retomo de la curiosidad—. Sin embargo no tendría sentido, ¿verdad?, sacarla a colación *ante él*. No, debo irme. —Volvió a aproximarse a ella, y esta vez ella le dio la mano—. Pero si efectivamente te quedas con el señor Longdon a solas, ¿querrás hacerme un favor? De hecho quiero decir no sólo hoy, sino en todas las ocasiones oportunas.

Ella permaneció aguardando.

—*Cualquier* favor —manifestó por último—. Pero tendrás que decirme cuál.

—Pues —contestó él al momento— llamémoslo un cambalache. Yo me ocupo de tu madre…

—¿Y yo…? —Ella había tenido que aguardar otra vez.

—Tú te ocupas de mi reputación. Quiero decir por consideración a *él*. Se ha portado con tal gentileza conmigo que, cuando pienso en mi fracaso a la hora de retribuírsela, ello me hace sonrojarme de pies a cabeza. Lo he desatendido deplorablemente… debido a una azarosa serie de complicaciones. Hay cosas que habría debido hacer y no hice. Hay una en particular… pero da lo mismo. Y ni siquiera he dado explicaciones sobre *eso*. He sido un grosero y no me proponía serlo y no he podido evitarlo. Pero helo ahí. Di alguna palabra en mi favor. De un modo u otro explica que *no* soy un grosero. En suma —dijo el joven, otra vez bastante ruborizado a causa de la intensidad de sus pensamientos—, expresémoslo como que puedes confiar por entero *en mí* si me permites (en lo que respecta a mi buen nombre como caballero) confiar un poco *en ti*.

—Oh, puedes confiar en mí —respondió Nanda estrechándole la mano.

—¡Adiós entonces! —exclamó él desde la puerta.

—Adiós —dijo ella después de que él la hubiese cerrado.

XXXVII

Ya eran las cinco y media cuando se presentó Mitchy; y en el entretanto la abstracción femenina no había sufrido más interrupción que la llegada del té, que, empero, la muchacha había dejado sin tocar. No bien entró, él expresó su temor de no haber sido puntual, a lo cual ella respondió con la aseveración de que por el contrario lo había sido admirablemente y con la mención de toda la ayuda a la paciencia que ella había extraído del placer de media hora con el señor Van; alusión ésta que por parte de Mitchy naturalmente suscitó de inmediato el más vivo interés:

—¿Así que se *ha* arriesgado por fin? ¡Cuán inmensamente apasionante! ¿Y tu madre? —continuó; tras lo cual, como ella no dijera nada, aclaró—: Quiero decir, ¿lo vio *ella*, y acaso él está con ella en este momento?

—No: ella no habrá asomado la nariz… a menos que tú hayas preguntado por ella.

—No lo he hecho. Sólo pregunté por ti.

Nanda reflexionó un instante; después dijo:

—Pero, así y todo, vendrás a verla de vez en cuando, ¿no? Me refiero a que nunca la abandonarás, ¿verdad?

Ante esto, Mitchy lanzó una carcajada:

—¡Mi querida muchacha, sois una familia adorable!

Ella se lo tomó con bastante benevolencia:

—Es lo mismo que dijo el señor Van. Dijo que estoy tratando de hacer carrera de ella.

—¿Eso dijo? —El visitante, aunque sin menoscabo de su diversión, pareció impresionado—. Debiste de compenetrarte con él bastante profundamente.

Ella volvió a recapacitar:

—Vaya, creo que sí que lo logré. Se mostró enormemente simpático y considerado.

—¡Huy —convino Mitchy—, puedes confiar en que siempre será así!

—A raíz de mi nota me escribió —perseveró Nanda— una contestación sumamente hermosa.

Otra vez Mitchy quedó impresionado:

—¿Tu nota? ¿Qué nota?

—Para pedirle que viniera. La escribí a principios de semana.

—Ah… entiendo —comentó Mitchy, como si eso ya fuese harina de otro costal—. En ese caso, desde luego, él no podía menos que venir.

Sin embargo su compañera tomó a meditar:

—No lo sé.

—¡Arrea!; claro que lo sabes —dijo riendo Mitchy—. ¡Ya me gustaría a mí ver que él… o incluso que tú…! —A ojos de un permanente espectador de estos episodios habría habido una singular similitud entre las maneras y todos los movimientos que habían seguido a la entrada de este visitante y aquellos que habían acompañado la acomodación de su predecesor. Depositó el sombrero, tal como había hecho Vanderbank, en tres lugares sucesivos y pareció tener el mismo número de opiniones contradictorias sobre la seguridad de su bastón y la retención de sus guantes en su mano. Pospuso la elección definitiva de un asiento y contempló los objetos en su derredor mientras hablaba de otras materias. De hecho finalmente tales objetos llegaron a impresionarlo de idéntica forma—: ¡Qué bonita has dejado tu habitación y vaya cantidad de objetos bellos posees!

—También eso fue precisamente lo que dijo el señor Van. Pareció admirarse muchísimo.

Pero a tenor de esto Mitchy llevó a cabo una nueva incursión en la extravagancia:

—Entonces ¿me es imposible hacer otra cosa que plagiarlo? He venido, ya sabes, a ser original.

—En *tu* caso sería original —repuso Nanda con presteza— asemejarte a él siquiera remotamente. Pero

¿*no* vendrás de vez en cuando —retrocedió en la conversación— para ver sólo a mamá? Tendrás sobradas oportunidades.

Él recogió aquellas palabras con mayor gravedad:

—¿Qué entiendes por oportunidades? ¿Que te marchas? ¡Eso *aumentará* el atractivo! —exclamó al no ofrecer ella una respuesta.

—Habré de esperar —contestó la muchacha por último— antes de decirte con certidumbre qué voy a hacer. Está todo en el aire… y sin embargo creo que lo sabré hoy. Veré al señor Longdon.

Mitchy se extrañó:

—¿Hoy?

—Se presentará aquí a las seis y media.

—¿Y entonces lo sabrás?

—Vaya… *él* lo sabrá.

—¿El señor Longdon?

—Al señor Longdon me refería —dijo ella tras un instante.

Mitchy sacó su reloj:

—En ese caso ¿voy a estorbar?

—Aún queda una barbaridad de tiempo. Debes tomar el té. En todo caso tú ya sabes —continuó la muchacha— qué entiendo por las oportunidades que tendrás.

Ella ya le había preparado su té, que él asió a la par que decía:

—¡Esta tarde has encontrado un hueco para cada uno!

—Bueno, es mera casualidad que vengáis juntos… salvando naturalmente que *no* venís juntos. Sencillamente acepté la hora que cada uno de vosotros propuso libremente. Pero habría sido estupendo incluso si *hubieseis* coincidido. Quiero decir, o sea —explicó—, incluso si coincidís tú y el señor Longdon. Al señor Van, lo confieso, lo quería a solas.

Mitchy había permanecido contemplándola por encima de la taza, y exclamó:

—¡Cada vez eres más extraordinaria!

—Bien, pues si estoy mejorando tanto otórgame tu promesa.

Mientras Mitchy consumía su refrigerio, conservó su meditabunda mirada saltona; y dijo:

—Enseguida voy a querer más, por favor. Pero ¿te importa que pregunte si Van sabía…?

—…¿que el señor Longdon va a venir? Oh sí, se lo dije, y al irse me dejó un recado para él.

—¿Un recado? ¡Cuán terriblemente interesante!

Nanda reflexionó:

—Lo *será* terriblemente… para el señor Longdon.

—Ponme más *ahora*, por favor —dijo Mitchy mientras ella le asía la taza—. Y para el señor Longdon únicamente, ¿eh? ¿Eso es una forma de decir que no es cosa de *mi* incumbencia?

La circunstancia de que ella atendiera —y con una feliz exhibición de especial cuidado— a las inmediatas necesidades materiales de él contribuyó extrañamente, cuando ella respondió, a dar una impresión de sinceridad:

—¡Ah, señor Mitchy, las cosas de mi incumbencia que a estas alturas no se hayan convertido con la mayor naturalidad del mundo en cosas de tu incumbencia… vaya, soy incapaz de imaginarme ninguna en este momento, y no querría, bien lo sabes, ni aunque pudiera!

—En tal caso puedo prometerte que no hay ninguna cosa de mi incumbencia —declaró Mitchy— que merced al mismo criterio no haya sufrido el mismo desplazamiento. ¡Ten bien presente, por favor, que si alguna vez una muchacha ha tenido un futuro comprometido…!

—¿Qué entiendes —atajó ella— por un futuro comprometido?

—Caramba, la garantía de hallarse abrumada para todos los tiempos venideros con las aventuras de un caballero de quien jamás podrá deshacerse aduciendo el especioso alegato de que no es más que su marido o su novio o su padre o su hijo o su hermano o su tío o su primo. Ahí se yergue, no encuadrable en ninguna de esas categorías.

—Sí —murmuró Nanda con gentileza—, sencillamente es su Mitchy.

—Exactamente. Y un Mitchy, ya lo ves, es… ¿cómo se lo denomina a eso?… sencillamente indisoluble. Además es descarnadamente inquisitivo. Llega hasta el extremo de preguntarse si Van se enteró también de que me esperabas *a mí*.

—Oh sí…, se lo dije todo.

Mitchy sonrió:

—¿Todo?

—Se lo dije, se lo dije —contestó ella con impaciencia.

Mitchy dudó:

—¿Y entonces me dejó asimismo un recado?

—No, nada de nada. Lo que he de hacer por él ante el señor Longdon —explicó acto seguido— es a efectos prácticos presentar una especie de exculpación.

—Ah, y conmigo —recogió sus palabras Mitchy con celeridad— no puede haber la posibilidad de nada de esa especie. Entiendo. A mí no me ha hecho ninguna injuria.

Ahora con la mirada dirigida hacia la ventana, Nanda le dio vueltas a aquello:

—Me parece que él no sería demasiado consciente incluso si te hubiera hecho una.

—Entiendo, entiendo. Y nosotros no se lo revelaríamos.

Con cierta brusquedad ella cesó de mirar hacia el exterior:

—No se lo revelaríamos. Pero se mostró considerado desde todo punto de vista —insistió—. Nadie habría podido mostrarse más paciente respecto de, sin ir más lejos, lo de haber venido tan poco a esta casa durante tanto tiempo. ¡Como si no tuviese infinidad de otras cosas que hacer! Ni tan siquiera las esgrimió en calidad de buenas razones tanto como le habría sido factible. ¡Y figúrate, con todos sus importantes deberes (todos los grandes asuntos que dependen de él), que nosotros nos dediquemos a formarle pequeñas broncas vulgares por haber sido «desatendidos»! A decir verdad se sirvió tan poco de todo lo que fácilmente habría podido alegar (habló, quiero decir, como si todas las culpas fuesen suyas) que resueltamente servidora casi tuvo que *indicarle* sus excusas. ¡Como si —ella sostuvo su discurso exhaustivamente— él no las tuviese de sobra!

—¿Son sólo las personas como yo —aventuró Mitchy— quienes no tienen ninguna?

—Sí… las personas como tú. Personas sin utilidad, sin ocupación y sin importancia. Como tú, ya sabes —siguió ella—, hay tantísimos. —Fue sin transición de tono como a continuación agregó—: Si eres malo, Mitchy, no te diré nada.

—Y, si soy bueno, ¿qué me dirás? Lo que a buen seguro más deseo *saber* es por qué necesita Van, como dijiste hace un momento, ser «exculpado» por el señor Longdon. ¿Cuál es la injuria que reconoce haberle hecho a él?

—Oh, a él lo ha «desatendido» (si eso supone algún consuelo para nosotros) en la misma medida.

—¿No lo ha visitado y ese tipo de cosas?

—Sí… y mencionó alguna otra cuestión.

Mitchy se asombró:

—¿La mencionó?

—En lo tocante a la cual —dijo Nanda— no lo ha complacido.

Tras unos momentos, Mitchy se arriesgó:

—Pero ¿cuál es esa otra cuestión?

—Oh, dice que cuando yo le hable el señor Longdon sabrá de qué se trata.

Mitchy asimiló aquello con seriedad:

—Y ¿vas a hablarle?

—¿En favor del señor Van? —¿Cómo, pareció ella preguntar, podía él dudarlo?—. Caramba, lo primerísimo de todo.

—Y, entonces, ¿el señor Longdon te explicará?

—¿Lo que el señor Van quiere decir? —Nanda reflexionó—. Vaya, espero que no.

Mitchy ahondó:

—¿«Esperas…»?

—Caramba, si se trata de algo que puede significar algún desdoro de alguien como él. Quiero decir que en ese caso no me apetecerá enterarme en lo más mínimo.

Mitchy miró como si pudiera comprender eso y sin embargo pudiera imaginarse a la vez algo así como un conflicto:

—Pero ¿y si el señor Longdon insiste…?

—…¿en explicármelo? No le permitiré insistir. ¿Lo harías *tú*? —le planteó.

—¡Oh, yo no estoy involucrado!

—¡Sí, lo estás! —casi resonó ella.

—¡Oh…! —exclamó Mitchy riéndose. Luego de lo cual agregó—: Pues bien, en ese caso tal vez yo conseguiría imponerme a ti.

—No, no lo conseguirías —volvió a declarar igual de tajantemente—, y de todos modos no desearías hacerlo.

Finalmente él patentizó que podía aceptar esto de ella: lo patentizó con el silencio en que sus miradas se encontraron durante un instante; luego lo patentizó acaso todavía más mediante una honda exclamación:

—¡Eres fenomenal!

También para semejante aseveración ella tuvo la desapegada receptividad de siempre:

—No creo serlo en nada salvo en el deseo de ocuparme de que *tú* sigas siéndolo.

—¡Muy bien, pues ocúpate de mí, ocúpate de mí! Me da en la nariz que actualmente no estoy en absoluto en condiciones, ¿sabes?, de ocuparme de mí mismo. De hecho te hago la advertencia —siguió Mitchy— de que a partir de ahora voy a acudir a ti por todos los motivos. Pero eres realmente portentosa —concluyó ya que en un principio ella no dijo nada ante esto—. Ni siquiera te aterrorizo.

—En efecto… por suerte para ti.

—¡Ah, pero te aviso claramente que pienso emplearme a fondo para lograrlo!

Nanda estudió todo aquello con una tan cercana aproximación al jolgorio como era habitual en ella:

—Bien, pues si alguna vez lo logras será para ti un día triste.

—Te erizas con tu propio armamento —perseveró él—, pero el ingenio de toda una vida será consagrado a pillarte en algún punto en que estés desprevenida.

—Y ¿cuál punto, si me haces el favor, será ése?

—¡Ah, no soy tan tonto como para empezar por darte pistas! —Tras esto, Mitchy volvió la espalda con un suspiro ambiguo pero inequívocamente espontáneo; contempló diversas fotografías, tomó un libro o dos tal como había hecho Vanderbank y durante un par de minutos reinó el silencio entre ellos—. Lo que se extiende ante mí —reanudó la plática tras un intervalo durante el cual fue obvio que, pese a sus movimientos, no había mirado hacia nada—, lo que se extiende ante mí es la feliz perspectiva de mi sensación de que en ti he encontrado a una amiga con quien, tan absoluta y francamente, siempre puedo ir al fondo de las cosas. Este lujo, según puedes ver en este preciso instante, de nuestra libertad para mirar de frente los hechos es un lujo que, te lo prometo, pienso permitirme sin cortapisas. —Se detuvo ante ella de nuevo, y de nuevo ella guardó silencio—. Es maravilloso, ¿verdad?, que por fin no quede una sola cosa respecto de la cual no podamos despachamos a gusto. Es decir, que no podamos designar inteligiblemente y abordar desprejuiciadamente. Hemos excavado un largo túnel horadando las timideces artificiales y los secretismos supersticiosos, y a mí por lo menos no me hará falta sino recordar que exhibiendo una abierta confianza y poniendo todos los puntos sobre las íes lo que haré será seguir el ejemplo que tú misma has dado tan admirablemente. ¿Vas directa al meollo? Bien. ¡Es cuanto pido!

Él se había dejado caer en un asiento mientras hablaba y, puesto que ella continuaba en el suyo, quedaron frente a frente; pero seguidamente ella se incorporó y, al instante inmediato, mientras él permanecía en su sitio, se vio enfrascada en poner en orden los objetos que ambos visitantes habían estado desorganizando.

—¡Si no fueses delicioso serías horrendo!

—¡Ahí lo tienes! Fácilmente podría, en otras palabras, aterrorizarte si quisiera.

Ella hizo caso omiso de este comentario, limitándose, luego de unos pocos toques más por aquí y por allá, a formular una observación de su propia cosecha:

—Pese a todo, el señor Van va a ser encantador con mamá. Eso hemos decidido.

—Ah, ¿conque Van *puede* sacar tiempo…?

Ella vaciló:

—Para una cosa como *ésa*… sí. Para, quiero decir, convencerla suficientemente de que no la ha abandonado. ¿De modo que no admites cuantísimo más tiempo puedes sacar *tú*?

—¡Ah, vaya por Dios, ahí lo tenemos de nuevo! —exclamó Mitchy con presteza.

Sin embargo él había ido, al parecer, más lejos de lo que ella podía seguirlo:

—Lo tenemos ¿dónde?

—Pues, como digo, en el meollo y en el fondo de las cosas.

—¡Ah! —Ella recayó en una indiferencia que no era sino parte de su paciencia global ante toda la ironía de él.

—Carece de sentido discutir la cuestión de abandonar o no a tu madre. Sencillamente uno *no* la abandona. Uno no puede. Ella es algo que está ahí.

—Es exactamente lo que dice *él*. Ella es algo que está ahí.

—¡Ah, pero es que deseo decir algo que no sea lo que dice «él»! —exclamó riendo Mitchy—. Sea como fuere, él no ha podido hablarte de ninguna atadura comparable a la que en mi caso es ahora casi la más perceptible. *Yo* tengo una esposa, bien lo sabes.

—¡Oh, Mitchy! —musitó la muchacha de un modo quejoso aunque impreciso.

—Y mi esposa (¿no lo sabías?) —prosiguió Mitchy— está empezando a volverse rematadamente íntima de tu madre. Por supuesto no te pilla de nuevas que tu madre es toda una experta en esposas. Ahora que nuestro matrimonio es un hecho consumado se toma el mayor interés por él (o promete hacerlo, con tal que su atención quede eficientemente atrapada) y más especialmente por lo que creo que es generalmente denominado nuestra peculiar situación… pues por lo visto, ¿sabes?, estamos *dentro* de una situación peculiar de la más conspicua de las maneras. Por consiguiente Aggie ya está encarrilada, y es probable que llegue a estarlo aún más, en lo que es universalmente reconocido como el sistema habitual de tu madre. Tu madre la atraerá, la examinará, finalmente la «comprenderá». De hecho, la «ayudará» al igual que ya ha «ayudado» a tantísimas otras antes y seguirá «ayudando» a tantísimas otras después. Con Aggie convertida de esta guisa en satélite y frecuentadora (hasta un grado que jamás *ha* alcanzado) —continuó—, ¿qué constituirá todo el asunto a efectos prácticos sino una multiplicación de nuestros puntos de contacto? Puedes recordarme la afirmación de la señora Brook en el sentido de que aunque es cierto que en su época presidía una especie de círculo, ahora el círculo, como resultado de los acontecimientos, ha quedado reducido a un conjunto de átomos fortuitos; pero pese a todo, mi querida Nanda, para tu preclara inteligencia esas palabras no resultarán ser más que un eco piadoso de su pasajera humildad o (poniéndonos en lo peor) su pasajera desesperación. Las generaciones surgirán y pasarán, y el *personnel*, como dicen los periódicos, de la tertulia cambiará y será reemplazado, pero la institución en sí, fundada como está sobre una profunda necesidad humana, tiene aún un largo camino que recorrer y una ingente labor que realizar. *Nosotros* no seguiremos, pero tu madre sí, y habida cuenta de que felizmente Aggie es muy joven, consiguientemente tu madre está abastecida, para las temporadas venideras, a una escala lo bastante considerable como para que en este preciso momento nos sintamos tranquilos. Por otra parte, ya que tú eres casi tan buena con los maridos como la señora Brook lo es con las esposas, ¿por qué no íbamos a estar nosotros, como pareja, nosotros los Mitchy, perfectamente atendidos, y por qué no iba yo a poder pintarte mi futuro como satisfechamente garantizado? La única sombra apreciable que discierno proviene, para mí, del problema de lo que hoy pueda acaecer entre tú y el señor Longdon. ¿Debo inferir —preguntó Mitchy— que dentro de un breve rato el señor Longdon va a presentarse aquí para escuchar una respuesta a alguna proposición que te ha hecho?

Nanda lo miró unos momentos con una especie de solemnidad de ternura, y su voz, cuando finalmente habló, fue trémula debido a un sentimiento que a las claras se había desarrollado en ella mientras atendía a la ristra de antojos, agrios y dulces, que él acababa de hacer desfilar.

—Eres desenfrenado —dijo únicamente—, eres desenfrenado.

Él lanzó una formidable mirada saltona:

—¿O sea que ya empiezo a aterrorizarte? —Con la cabeza realizó un ademán negativo bastante desolado —: Todavía no lo he intentado en absoluto. Hay algo —añadió pasado un instante— que deseo ardientemente pedirte.

—¡Pues entonces…! —Aunque no se mostró entusiasmada, al menos se mostró caritativa.

—Huy, pero es que se me hace que aun cuando tú demuestras todo el valor necesario para ir al meollo y al fondo *conmigo*, yo no estoy plenamente seguro (nunca lo he estado) de poseer el arrojo de hacer otro tanto contigo. Es cuestión —aclaró Mitchy— de lo mucho que (sobre un problema particular) sepas.

Ella continuó encarándolo con la mayor amabilidad del mundo:

—¿A estas alturas todavía no se ha visto sobradamente que lo sé todo?

La réplica femenina, así formulada, tardó un minuto o dos en hacer efecto, pero cuando principió a hacerlo esparció francamente una luz. El semblante de Mitchy se tomó de un color que habría podido ser producto de que ella le hubiese acercado algún fanal de caprichosos vidrios.

—¡Lo sabes, lo sabes! —exclamó él.

—Por supuesto que lo sé.

—¡Lo sabes, lo sabes! —repitió Mitchy.

—Todo —continuó ella imperturbablemente— salvo de qué estás hablando.

Él guardó silencio unos instantes, fija la mirada en ella.

—¿Puedo besarte la mano?

—No —respondió ella—; eso es lo que yo llamo desenfrenado.

Él se había erguido al tiempo que hacía su pregunta y tras la respuesta permaneció un momento clavado en el sitio:

—Observa: te he aterrorizado. Resulta ser así de fácil. Pero lo único que buscaba era demostrártelo y cerciorarme personalmente. Ahora que ya tengo la certeza interior nunca se me ocurrirá volver a hacerlo con ningún otro designio. —Él se dio la vuelta a fin de iniciar una vez más sus absortos deambulares—.

¿Esta vez el señor Longdon te ha pedido una grandiosa adhesión pública, y para lo que acude hoy es para recibir tu respuesta definitiva? ¿Una terminante e irrevocable fuga con él es la política que él aconseja, y vendrá dispuesto a emprenderla sobre la marcha con una silla de posta y dos pistolones?

En verdad aquella imagen semejó aparecérsele a Nanda con cierta vividez, y durante algunos momentos ella la contempló sin un asomo de sonrisa:

—No vamos a necesitar pistolas de ninguna clase, independientemente de cuál sea la decisión respecto de la silla de posta; y cualquier fuga que emprendamos juntos no precisará el amparo del secretismo o de la noche. Como te he dicho ya, mamá…

—…¿no se tenderá en medio del camino para impedir vuestra temeraria empresa? Recuerdo —dijo Mitchy— que ya me hablaste de su magnífica resignación. Pero ¿y papá? —inquirió excéntricamente.

Nanda reflexionó sobre aquel punto durante un lapso más prolongado:

—Bueno, el señor Longdon tiene (dentro de su heredad) muy buenos terrenos de caza.

—¿Así es que de vez en cuando Edward podrá pasearse por ellos con su vieja escopeta? También eso está bien… mientras no sea, ya que le quedarás de camino, a fin de dispararte *a ti*. Lo tienes todo bien pensado y organizado, en otras palabras, y sólo te resta, si finalmente el proyecto te seduce, levantar el campo. Levantas el campo, dejas muchísimo espacio libre. ¡*Es* interesante —exclamó Mitchy— llegar así al meollo contigo! Miro a mi alrededor y veo a todos apaciguados y a todos contentos excepto uno o dos. ¿A qué vienen, pues, dudas y demoras?

—No sabes, querido señor Mitchy —respondió Nanda tras tomarse su tiempo—, ni la mitad de lo que imaginas.

—Pero ¿acaso mi pregunta no es abiertamente una confesión de ignorancia y una renuncia a imaginar? Desde este momento me declaro ante ti —manifestó Mitchy— hombre que no sabe nada de nada y que literalmente recibe de tus manos todo conocimiento y toda vida. Que lo demuestre, mi querida Nanda, mi infatigable actitud exploratoria. Según das a entender, ¿cualquier vacilación que todavía puedas sentir proviene de tu conciencia de que en Londres tienes deberes a los cuales no puedes sustraerte a la ligera? Oh —dijo pensativo—, por lo menos sí sé que los *tienes*.

Ella lo escudriñó con su eterna dulzura mientras él describía imprecisos giros por la habitación.

—Eres desenfrenado, eres desenfrenado —reiteró—. Pero carece de importancia. Jamás me desentenderé de ti.

Él se detuvo abruptamente:

—Ah, eso es lo que deseaba oírte decir con ese preciso número de nítidas palabras áureas… aunque desde luego no voy a fingir haber pensado que fuese estrictamente necesario. No es estrictamente necesario un alfiler con una gran turquesa en mi corbata; lo cual secundariamente implica, dicho sea de paso, que si se te ocurre admirarlo eres muy libre de hacerlo. Palabras tales (ahí quiero ir a parar) son como piedras preciosas: el orgullo, ya ves, del corazón propio. Son pura vanidad, pero al fin y al cabo ayudan. Naturalmente tienes que ocuparte de la pobre Tishy —siguió adelante.

—¿Querrás dejarlo totalmente a *mi* arbitrio? —dijo Nanda como si no lo hubiese oído.

—Y además tienes a la pobre Carrie —prosiguió él—, aunque *a ella* por supuesto te la repartes con tu madre.

—¿Querrás dejarlo totalmente a *mi* arbitrio? —repitió la muchacha.

—Por no hablar del pobre Cashmore —continuó él—, de quien te ocupas *entero*, ¿no es así?, tú sola.

—¿Querrás dejarlo totalmente a mi arbitrio? —repitió una vez más.

Esta vez él hizo una pausa, cavilando súbita y expresivamente.

—De ahora en adelante, ¿vas a hacer algo a todos esos respectos… quiero decir, en compañía de nuestro amigo? —inquirió.

Ella pareció sentir cierto escrúpulo a la hora de decirlo, pero al final lo reveló:

—Sí: ahora ya no le importa.

Una vez más Mitchy lanzó una carcajada:

—¡En cuanto familia, *sois*…! —Pero ya se había interrumpido a sí mismo—: ¿Quieres decir que a pesar de los pesares el señor Longdon se sentirá interesado de una u otra forma…?

—…¿en *mis* intereses? Claro que sí… puesto que ya ha ido tan lejos. Has exteriorizado sorpresa ante mi deseo de aguardar y meditar; pero ¿cómo puedo no aguardar y no meditar cuando tantísimas cosas dependen de la cuestión (ahora tan ineludible) de cuánto más lejos *querrá* ir?

—Entiendo —dijo Mitchy, hondamente impresionado—. Y ¿de qué depende eso?

Ella hubo de reflexionar:

—De cuánto más lejos, por mi parte, *deba* ir yo.

La comprensión de Mitchy fue ya absoluta:

—¿O sea que acude para que le especifiques la distancia exacta?

—Sí… en gran medida.

Mitchy escudriñó en derredor en busca de su sombrero:

—Así es que naturalmente me doy cuenta de que prácticamente se ha acabado mi tiempo puesto que lo que querréis será estar juntos a solas.

Nanda le dirigió una mirada al reloj.

—Oh, te queda un margen aún —dijo.

—Pero ¿no deseas un rato libre para meditaciones…?

—…¿ahora que te he visto? —Muy patentemente Nanda ya se había puesto meditabunda.

—Es decir, si tienes alguna decisión importante que tomar.

—Es que —contestó ella— verte me *ha* ayudado.

—Huy, pero a la vez te ha intranquilizado. Por lo tanto… —Y él cogió su paraguas[22].

La mirada femenina se posó en el curioso mango.

—Si te aferras a tu idea de que estoy aterrorizada te llevarás un gran chasco. Nunca te verás en la oportunidad de confortarme.

—¿Con eso quieres decir que de entrada yo poseo tal entereza…?

—Sí: que hasta que yo te vea asustado a ti…

—¿Y bien?

—Pues que no admitiré que haya algo que haya salido de un modo para el cual yo no estuviese prevenida.

Mitchy miró con interés hacia su sombrero.

—Entonces, ¿qué es eso que debo «dejar a tu arbitrio»? —Tras lo cual, como ella le volviera la espalda con una interjección reprimida y no dijera, mientras él la observaba, nada más, él siguió—: No cabe duda de que para ti es natural charlar, pero lo cierto es que te pongo nerviosa. Adiós, adiós.

Sin embargo ella lo detuvo con un novedoso gesto cuando él alcanzaba la puerta.

—Lo único que está haciendo Aggie es intentar averiguar…

—Sí, ¿el qué? —preguntó él, aguardando.

—Caramba, la clase de persona que es ella misma. ¿Cómo habría podido ella saberlo anteriormente? Le había sido ocultado cuidadosa y rebuscadamente… le había sido mantenido en tal oscuridad que ella no podía discernir nada. Ahora mismo ella no es como *yo*.

Él escuchaba pasmado:

—¿Como tú?

—Caramba, yo tengo la ventaja de que nunca hubo una edad en que no supiese *una* cosa u otra y de que fui cada vez más consciente, conforme fui creciendo, de un centenar de resquicios por los cuales se filtraba la luz.

Mitchy se quedó mirando fijamente.

—¡Eres maravillosa, querida! —protestó.

Ah, pero ella siguió adelante:

—*Yo* tenía un plan respecto de Aggie.

—Oh, ¿acaso no sé muy bien que lo tenías? Y ¿acaso no recuerdo hasta qué punto estabas segura de la clase de persona…?

—…¿que ni siquiera ella misma —atajó Nanda— sospechaba ser? Actualmente sigo igual de segura. Ello es exactamente como yo pensaba, sólo que hay muchísima más cantidad de ello. Más cantidad *ha* salido a la luz… y más saldrá aún. Ya sabes: cuando no ha habido nada antes, tiene que salir todo como un torrente. De modo que, si incluso yo estoy perpleja, no hay duda de que *ella* lo está.

—¡Y no hay duda de que *yo* lo estoy! —El interés de Mitchy, aunque incluso ahora no dejase de estar matizado de ironía, se había incrementado a ojos vista—. Entonces —continuó—, ¿reconoces que *estás* perpleja?

Nanda titubeó ligeramente:

—Meramente ante la cuantiosidad de ello. Creo que es algo espléndido. La única persona cuya consternación no acabo de entender —agregó— es la prima Jane.

—¡Oh, a la prima Jane la consternación le está bien empleada!

—Si la prima Jane defendía tanto —perseveró Nanda— que el matrimonio debía hacerlo todo…

—…¿no tendría que sentir tanto canguelo al enterarse de lo que el matrimonio *está* haciendo? ¡Desde luego, ella tendría que ser la última en sentirlo! —dejó sentado Mitchy—. Juro que me lo paso en grande

con su pavor.

—Pero es algo penoso, bien lo sabes —dijo Nanda.

—¡Oh, patético!

—¡Bueno, claro está —pareció meditar la muchacha asertivamente— que al fin y al cabo ella no había podido soñar que…! —Pero se contuvo bruscamente—. Lo importante es servir de ayuda.

—Y ¿en qué sentido? —preguntó Mitchy con la extraordinaria pinta de inaugurar un certamen de sugerencias constructivas.

—Para que Aggie se descubra a sí misma. ¿Crees —siguió de inmediato— que realmente Lord Petherton lo hace?

Mitchy recapacitó sinceramente:

—¿Que si sirve de ayuda? Oh, hace lo que puede, supongo. Sí —añadió a renglón seguido—, Petherton es estupendo.

—Eres tú mismo, naturalmente —continuó su compañera—, quien más puede ayudar.

—Ciertamente, y yo también estoy haciendo lo que puedo. Así es que con tan buenos ayudantes —finalmente él semejaba haberlo aceptado todo de ella—, ¿qué es, pregunto nuevamente, eso que, según solicitas, debo dejar a tu entero arbitrio?

Nanda necesitó, mientras él seguía aguardando, algún rato para pronunciar la respuesta.

—El cumplir mi promesa —contestó.

—¿Tu promesa?

—Jamás desentenderme de ti.

—¡Ah —exclamó Mitchy—, eso está mejor!

—¡Entonces adiós! —dijo ella.

—Adiós. —Pero él se acercó a ella unos pasos—: ¿No *puedo* besarte la mano?

—Jamás.

—¿Jamás?

—Jamás.

—¡Ah! —espetó él excéntricamente mientras se iba de la habitación a toda prisa.

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El rato libre que él había caracterizado como previsiblemente útil para ella fue no poco abreviado, empero, a la hora de la verdad, debido a una puntualidad de llegada por parte del señor Longdon tan extrema que causó que lo primero fuesen unas palabras casi de disculpa.

—No dirás —comenzó de inmediato su nuevo visitante— que no te he dejado tan sola, todos estos interminables días, como te prometí cuando subí a verte aquella tarde en que tras mi regreso a Londres hallé aguardándome en el salón al señor Mitchett en vez de a tu madre.

—En efecto —dijo ella—; de veras ha obrado usted tal como le pedí.

—Pues bien —repuso él—, hace media hora sentí que, por muy cercano que estuviera mi alivio, no podía soportarlo más; de tal modo que, aun cuando sabía que ello me haría llegar demasiado pronto, a las seis en punto partí hacia nuestro lugar de cita.

—¡Y resulta que yo no tengo té para recompensarlo! —Saltaba a la vista que no era sino ahora cuando ella se percataba—. Debieron de llevarse el servicio de té sin que me diese cuenta.

Su anciano amigo la miró con cierta fijeza:

—¿Estabas presente en la habitación?

—Sí… pero no vi entrar al criado.

—¿Qué estabas haciendo entonces?

Nanda reflexionó; como de costumbre, su sonrisa fue el más tenuemente discernible de los rasgos externos.

—Pensando *en usted*.

—¿Con tan tremenda intensidad?

—Bueno, en otras cosas también y en otras personas. En realidad, en todas las cuestiones que en nuestra última charla le dije, ya sabe, que me parecía mejor ventilar conmigo misma antes de reunirme con usted para lo que supongo que ahora mismo ocupa sus pensamientos.

El señor Longdon había mantenido la mirada fija en ella, pero ante esto se dio la vuelta… sin, no obstante, a modo de alternativa, repasar exhaustivamente la situación material de ella con la turbada alegría de Vanderbank o la atenuada melancolía de Mitchy.

—¿O sea que —recogió con cierta sequedad las palabras femeninas— has estado ventilando cuestiones contigo misma? —Pero, antes de que pudiera ella contentar, prosiguió—: No quiero nada de té, gracias. Me sentí, a partir de las cinco, en tal estado de nervios que durante el transcurso de aquella hora acudí tres veces a mi club, donde tengo la impresión de que cada vez me tomé un té. Me atrevería a decir, sin embargo, que no fue allí donde me los tomé —continuó tras un instante—, pues extrañamente guardo la confusa imagen de un establecimiento en Oxford Street (¿o fue más bien en Regent?) al cual entré errabundamente para distraer el tiempo con un líquido al cual te suplico que culpes enteramente si te parezco trastornado. De hecho, ¿sabes qué he estado haciendo durante los últimos diez minutos? Vagabundeando de aquí para allá por vuestra graciosa calle semicircular hasta que pudiera aventurarme a pasar adentro.

—Entonces, ¿vio salir a Mitchy? Pero no: no ha podido ser —rectificó Nanda—. Él se marchó hace más rato.

Su visitante se había dejado caer en un sofá, donde, apuntalado por el respaldo, ahora estaba sentado más bien tieso, con los lentes en la nariz, las manos en los bolsillos y los codos muy separados del tronco.

—Hace más de diez minutos que Mitchy te dejó y, sin embargo, ¿tu estado tras su despedida sigue siendo tal que pudo entrar una caterva de criados sin que fueses consciente? Entonces proporcióname amablemente algo de luz sobre la tesitura en que te ha sumido.

Ella se cernió ante él con su imperceptible sonrisa:

—Ya la advierte usted por sí mismo.

Con resolución él ejecutó un ademán negativo:

—Yo no advierto nada por mí mismo, y te suplico que comprendas que no es eso lo que he acudido a hacer hoy. Cualquier cosa que yo pueda terminar advirtiendo y que no haya advertido todavía, será exclusivamente, te lo aviso, si tú la dejas muy clara. Helo ahí; tienes sobrada tarea bien delimitada. Y ¿es en compañía del señor Mitchett, puedo preguntar, como has estado, según sugieres, delimitándola?

Nanda miró en derredor como sopesando muchas cosas; luego de lo cual su mirada retomó a él:

—¿Le importa que no me siente?

—No me importaría ni que te pusieras a andar cabeza abajo… al punto al que hemos llegado.

—No voy a poner a prueba su paciencia —repuso la muchacha bienhumoradamente— hasta ese límite. Tan sólo deseo que no se preocupe si doy unos pasos por la habitación.

Sin un solo gesto, el señor Longdon conservó su postura:

—Oh, no puedo complacerte en ese punto. Me *preocuparé*. He venido ex profeso a preocuparme, y cuanto más me entregue al tormento, a mi entender, más habremos agilizado nuestro asunto. Conque puedes bailar, si se te antoja, sobre esa cosa absolutamente pasiva que has hecho de mí.

—A lo que precisamente me *ha* sometido Mitchy a efectos prácticos —replicó ella animadamente— ha sido a una lección de baile; con lo cual acaso quiero decir más bien a una lección de cómo quedarme, tal como quiero que se quede usted mientras *yo* hablo, tan quieta como un ratón. ¡Mientras *ellos* hablan —declaró—, hacen tal cantidad de ejercicio!

—¿Ellos? —se extrañó el señor Longdon—. ¿Estuvo su esposa con él?

—Cielos, no: él y el señor Van.

—¿Estuvo el señor Van con él?

—Oh, no: antes, a solas. Por toda la habitación.

El señor Longdon hizo una pausa tan rica en inquisitividad que cuando por fin habló, su mismísima pregunta fue como una respuesta:

—¿Ha venido a verte el señor Van?

—Sí. Yo le escribí pidiéndoselo.

—¡Ah! —dijo el señor Longdon.

—Pero no se levante. —Ella alzó la mano—: ¡No lo haga!

—¿Por qué iba a hacerlo? —Él no se había movido ni un milímetro.

—Se mostró sumamente considerado: permaneció media hora y, cuando le dije que usted iba a presentarse aquí, dejó un bonito recado para usted.

El señor Longdon pareció aguardar a que le fuese referido tal agasajo, pero éste se hizo esperar.

—¿A qué llamas un «bonito» recado?

—A que he de decirle a usted que perdone.

—Que perdone ¿el qué?

—Caramba, que él no haya, durante tanto tiempo, ido a visitarlo ni le haya escrito. Que él haya parecido desatenderlo.

El visitante de Nanda orientó la mirada lo bastante lejos como para hacer partícipe de su sorpresa a toda la generalidad del vecindario:

—¿Desatenderme *a mí*?

—Bueno, creo que también a otros… que no vienen al caso. Ha estado tan atareado. Pero a usted sobre todo.

Ante esto el señor Longdon exhibió una frialdad que de algún modo se describió a sí misma como la mayor con que en toda su vida había acogido un acto de reparación y que se vio infinitamente reforzada por su sostenida inmovilidad.

—Pero ¿yo me he quejado de algo?

—¡Oh, no creo que él se figure que usted se ha quejado!

—Y ¿cómo habría podido venir a visitarme —siguió él— si durante todos estos últimos meses he estado tan escasamente en Londres?

Él no estaba más provisto de objeciones, empero, de lo que a estas alturas su compañera había llegado a estarlo de respuestas:

—Él debía de estar pensando en el plazo de la presente estancia de usted. Dijo que no lo había visto.

—Lo ha intentado más que de sobra: varias veces ha dejado su tarjeta —repuso el señor Longdon—. ¿Qué más quiere?

Nanda lo miró con su prolongada y seria frontalidad, en la que a menudo había un efecto de luz

independiente de la presencia o ausencia de una sonrisa:

—Oh, ya sabe, él quiere más.

—Pues entonces tenía a su alcance la posibilidad…

—Eso mismo piensa él —lo atajó velozmente— que usted debe de haber sentido. Y precisamente por eso hablo en favor de él.

—¡No lo hagas! —dijo el señor Longdon.

—Pero es que le prometí hacerlo.

—¡No lo hagas! —repitió el anciano.

Durante este rato ella había empleado toda su fina perspicacia en defensa de su joven amigo; pero ante esto habría podido interpretarse que lo abandonaba con un gesto de obediencia y un extraño suspiro leve. Para un oyente mínimamente iniciado este ahogado sonido habría podido significar incluso una claudicante retirada ante un esfuerzo más allá de los alcances de ella: una retirada que en tal sentido constituía la súbita ruptura de una aguda tensión. Al instante inmediato, pese a todo, evidentemente la muchacha extrajo nuevos bríos de la visión de la pálida y decididamente excesiva rigidez que ella misma había impuesto, de tal forma que, aun cuando su compañero estaba limitándose a cumplir su solicitud, ella experimentó un inopinado impulso de crítica:

—Es usted orgulloso a ese respecto… ¡demasiado orgulloso!

—Y bien, ¿qué pasa si lo soy? —La miró con una complejidad comunicativa donde no habría podido entremeterse palabra alguna—. El orgullo es estupendo cuando lo ayuda a uno a soportar las cosas.

—Ah —dijo Nanda—, pero eso es sólo cuando uno quiere extraer lo mínimo de ellas. Cuando uno quiere extraerles lo máximo…

—¿Y bien? —Él habló, como ella titubeara, con cierta pequeña crueldad de interés.

Ella titubeaba, sin embargo, de veras:

—Oh, no sé cómo expresarlo. —Ella se acaloró francamente en el intento—. Uno debe dejar que el sentido de todo eso a que me refiero… vaya, haga libre acto de presencia. Uno debe más bien agradecerlo. No lo sé… pero supongo que uno debe más bien ser humilde.

Aunque con visible renuencia, el señor Longdon le dio vueltas a aquello:

—Eso está muy bien…, pero es que tú eres mujer.

—Sí…, puede que eso represente una diferencia. Pero entonces, en un caso así —insistió Nanda—, ser mujer tiene sus ventajas.

Acerca de este punto tal vez habría podido interpretarse que seguidamente su amigo principió a ceder:

—Me da en la nariz que, incluso aceptando tal cosa, las ventajas son primordialmente para los demás. Me alegro, bien lo sabe Dios, de que tú no seas también un joven.

—Entonces estamos todos contentos.

Ella había hablado con una presteza que de nuevo semejó actuar sobre él en alguna medida como irritante, pues él acogió las palabras femeninas —tras otra pausa— con un prolongado murmullo burlón:

—¡Huy, *mi* orgullo…! —Pero ella no recogió estas palabras de ninguna manera; así que durante unos instantes él quedó abandonado a sus propias cavilaciones—. ¿Era eso lo que estabas tramando cuando el otro día me dijiste que necesitabas tiempo?

—Ah, no estaba tramando nada… si bien estaba, lo confieso, tratando de hallar solución a las cosas. Esa concreta idea de sencillamente pedirle por carta al señor Van que viniese… a decir verdad, entonces ese concreto vuelo de la imaginación aún no se me había ocurrido en absoluto.

—Nunca se me habría ocurrido, me siento obligado a decirlo, *a mí* —dijo el señor Longdon—. Nunca se me pasaría por la cabeza escribirle.

—Muy bien. Pero usted no sabe las razones. Yo quería abordarlo.

—¡No para hablarle de mí, espero de todo corazón! —replicó el señor Longdon, palideciendo nítidamente un poco más.

—No tema. Creo que mi intuición me dijo cómo se habría tomado usted *eso*. Fue para hablarle de mamá.

—¡No me digas! —repuso su visitante.

—Con ella se ha portado peor que con usted —completó—. Pero a partir de ahora lo arreglará.

La atención del señor Longdon no se despojó de severidad:

—Si entonces tiene tal remedio para lo más, ¿qué tendrá para lo menos?

Sin embargo, Nanda no quedó indecisa sino por un instante:

—Oh, soy yo quien lo compensa *a usted*. A mamá, ya ve, no hay ningún otro que podría compensarla en caso contrario.

A él inequívocamente esto le sonó, al principio, demasiado complicado para aceptarlo. Pero su

semblante se transmutó cuando alboreó una inspiración:

—¿Eso implica que *sí* te vendrás?

—Sí, si usted me acepta tal como soy… lo cual es, más que nunca, algo que previamente debo aclararle. Pero lo que *él* se propone mediante lo que llama usted su remedio es que yo haga que usted se sienta mejor respecto de él mismo.

El anciano la miró detenidamente:

—¡Es una idea genial eso de que «tú» lo hagas! Y ¿de veras fue capaz de venir a verte con el propósito de pedírtelo?

—Oh, no —dijo vigorosamente la muchacha—; simplemente vino con el propósito de hacer lo que *tenía* que hacer. Después de mi carta, ¿cómo podía no venir? Y acogió de un modo sumamente considerado lo que le dije en favor de mamá y lo que comprendió perfectamente que era mi misión ante él; de manera que su apelación a mí para que alegase ante usted en pro de… vaya, de su reputación… fue sólo algo añadido cuando vio que tenía una tan excelente ocasión.

Abruptamente estas palabras hicieron desmoronarse al señor Longdon, pero antes de que ella pudiera avisarlo nuevamente de la paciencia que seguiría siéndole precisa, él ya había vuelto, como si lo que ella le había narrado lo hubiese dejado excesivamente desconcertado, a entregarse a la situación:

—¿O sea que el buen hombre se atrevió a pedirte que le hicieras un favor… que lo ayudaras y lo alabaras?

—Oh, pero no se trataba de hacer nada demasiado oneroso, ¿no se da cuenta? Él sabía que usted iba a presentarse aquí. —Su ansiedad por que él comprendiese la dotó de una extraña sonrisa impostada—. No he de atribuirle a ello (en cuanto petición de él) una trascendencia excesiva, y no me cabe duda de que, antes que ocasionar que usted pensase peor de él por desear que yo dijera alguna palabra, de buena gana él habría preferido conservar cualquier mala imagen personal que ya hubiese suscitado. —Tras estas palabras ella se calló bruscamente como con una rápida sensación de que en realidad, simplemente debido a cómo habían sonado, la habían hecho quedar mucho más indefensa; y sólo fue capaz de brindarle a su amigo una de esas miradas que significan: «Si pudiera confiar en que usted no asentiría más de lo que es mi deseo, yo diría: "¡Ya sabe usted lo que quiero decir!"». De cualquier manera ella no le concedió (o trató de no concederle) tiempo para exteriorizar ninguna ironía—: Él fue todo lo que usted habría podido desear: tan halagüeño acerca de *usted*…

—…¿como acerca de ti? —la atajó el señor Longdon.

Ella objetó:

—Como acerca de mamá. —Tras lo cual ella se dio la vuelta como si aquello dejara hermosamente zanjada la cuestión.

Pero lo único que consiguió fue, mientras se dirigía hacia la ventana, hacer que él permaneciera sentado con aire sombrío.

—¡Me hace gracia, ¿sabes? —exclamó mientras la seguía con la mirada—, que digas que no eres orgullosa! Gracias a Dios lo *eres*, querida. Desde luego, es mejor para nosotros.

Ante esto, tras permanecer un momento quieta en su ubicación, se volvió hacia él:

—Me alegro de ser cualquier cosa (comoquiera que usted la denomine y aunque yo no pueda denominarla igual) que sea buena para *usted*.

Durante un breve rato él no dijo nada más, cual si merced a semejante declaración algo dentro de él se hubiese simplificado y aquietado; por último manifestó:

—Sería bueno para mí (con lo cual quiero decir que sería más fácil para mí) que no te preocuparas tan enormemente por él.

—¡Ah! —dejó escapar Nanda con un acento de mitigación a la vez tan precipitado y tan impreciso que al principio no logró sino volver aún más incomodante su propia actitud—. ¡Ah! —repitió de inmediato, pero con un incremento del mismo efecto. Tras lo cual, sabedora de ello, rápidamente agregó un nuevo comentario como para exonerarse—: Querido señor Longdon, ¿no es más bien usted quien es el más…?

—Sería más fácil para mí —siguió él, haciendo caso omiso— que no lo amaras, mi pobre muchacha, tan maravillosamente.

—Oh, pero si no lo amo… ¡por favor créame cuando le aseguro que no lo amo! —espetó. Esto brotó de ella, en una llamarada, con una rara voz temblorosa que culminó en algo más raro aún: en su brusco derrumbamiento, de inmediato, sobre el asiento más próximo, donde se ahogó en un mar de lágrimas. Tras un momento su tapado rostro no pudo menos que dar libre rienda al desbordamiento, y sollozó con una pasión tan rauda y violenta como el frenesí de algo salvaje que por un momento fuese sacado de su jaula; mientras tanto su anciano amigo permanecía inmóvil en el silencio roto por el sonido femenino, cerrando

distantemente (al otro extremo de la habitación) los ojos ante su propia impotencia y la pena de ella. Así continuaron sentados mientras sus aflicciones los unían y los separaban a un mismo tiempo. Ella se rehízo, empero, con un esfuerzo no menos notable que su hundimiento y se puso de pie otra vez mientras hablaba balbucientemente y se restregaba con rabia los ojos—: ¿Qué relevancia tiene eso, qué relevancia puede tener? —Entonces, paladinamente, incluso mientras pronunciaba estas palabras, sus dominadas lágrimas le toleraron ver que eso tenía la relevancia consistente en que también él había estado llorando; de tal forma que, ante esto, gimió con extravagancia—: ¡No sé por qué tiene que importarle a usted!

—No sabes lo que habría sido yo capaz de hacer por él. ¡No lo sabes, no lo sabes! —repitió él (mientras ella miraba como si naturalmente no pudiera saberlo) como con una reanudación de sus sueños de beneficencia y del dolor de su herida personal.

—Bueno, pero *él* le hace justicia a usted: él sí lo sabe. ¡Y eso demuestra… eso demuestra…!

Pero también en esta dirección, incapaz de decir lo que eso demostraba, ella ya había vuelto a debilitarse y de nuevo sólo pudo callarse bruscamente y dejar que su compañero permaneciese inmóvil.

—¡Oh, Nanda, Nanda! —se lamentó él hondamente; y la hondura de la compasión fue, vana y ciegamente, como la hondura de un reproche.

—Soy yo, soy yo, por tanto —dijo ella como si en ese momento consiguientemente debiera enfrentarse a ello con él—, soy yo la horrible imposible y quien he contagiado todo lo demás con mi propia imposibilidad. Por alguna persona distinta usted habría *podido* hacer eso que dice, y por alguna persona distinta usted puede todavía hacerlo.

Él la miró pasmado con su estéril pesar:

—¿Una persona distinta de él?

—Una persona distinta *de mí*.

—Y ¿qué interés tengo yo en una tal persona?

—Pero su interés en mí… ya ve usted muy bien dónde nos deja *eso*.

Ahora el señor Longdon se puso en pie y así se quedó con cierta tiesura; tras lo cual, por toda respuesta, preguntó:

—¿Dices que *sí* te vienes entonces? —Luego, como ella permaneciera callada (aparentemente abismada en su último pensamiento), añadió—: Comprendes claramente, lo doy por sentado, que esta vez es para nunca jamás volver a dejarme… o a *ser* dejada.

—Lo comprendo claramente —contestó ella enseguida—. Nunca jamás. Ése —siguió— fue el motivo de que yo le pidiera estos días.

—Bien, pues ya que te los has tomado…

—Ah, pero ¿se los ha tomado *usted*? —dijo Nanda. Ahora estaban muy cerca el uno del otro y, con una ternura de advertencia que fue ayudada por el hecho de que ambos tuvieran casi la misma estatura, ella puso la mano sobre el hombro masculino—. Para lo que le escribí a él —ahora ella había recobrado su perspicacia lo bastante para dar explicaciones— fue más que nada para que (cualquiera fuese el parecer que usted hubiese adoptado) usted advirtiera por sí mismo cómo él podía venir e irse[23].

—Y ¿de qué iba a servirme eso? ¿No lo había advertido *ya* por mí mismo?

—Bueno… ahora lo ha advertido otra vez más. Él ha estado aquí. No me importó lo que él pensara. Lo hice venir. Y además hay que tener en cuenta sus razones.

Ella mantuvo su mirada fija en el semblante de su compañero, pero tanto ahora como a continuación la de éste pareció divagar hacia lontananza.

—¿A mí qué me importan sus razones desde el momento en que no son las mías? —espetó él.

Ella reflexionó un instante, todavía asiéndolo con delicadeza y como en aras de una argumentación convincente:

—Pero quizá usted no las comprende del todo.

—Y ¿por qué diablos *debería* comprenderlas del todo?

—Ah, porque a las claras usted desea hacerlo —dijo Nanda con la mayor consideración del mundo—. Usted mismo lo ha reconocido cuando hemos hablado sobre…

—Oh, pero ¿cuándo *hemos* hablado? —interrumpió él bruscamente.

Esta vez él la había requerido tan a la cara que la mirada de ella fue la que se dedicó a errar.

—¿Cuándo? —hizo de eco ella.

—Cuándo.

Ella dudó:

—¿Cuándo *no* lo hemos hecho?

—Bueno, tal vez lo hayas hecho *tú*… si a eso es a lo que llamas hablar: a no soltar prenda. Pero yo no.

Tan sólo me importan, en cualquier caso, si hablamos de razones, las mías.

—Y entonces ¿también hay que tener en cuenta las de usted? Porque, ya sabe —continuó la muchacha —, yo *soy* exactamente así.

—¿Exactamente cómo?

—Exactamente como él piensa. —Luego, con tal gravedad que resultó casi una imploración, añadió—: No me diga que usted no *sabe* lo que él piensa. Sí que lo sabe.

Por fin sus miradas, sobre esa insólita base, lograron encontrarse, y seguidamente ello tuvo su efecto sobre el señor Longdon:

—Sí que lo sé.

—¿Y bien?

—¡Y bien! —Él alzó las manos y le asió la cara, acercándola tan próxima a la suya propia que, puesto que ella se lo consintió con gentileza, él pudo besarla con solemnidad en la frente—. ¡Vámonos! —dijo entonces con gran firmeza… como si de veras fuese cuestión de partir sobre la marcha.

Ello la hizo sonreír de una manera radiante, cosa que, con cierta compunción, ella se apresuró a enmendar haciendo por él mediante la presión de sus propios labios contra la mejilla masculina lo que él acababa de hacer por ella.

—¿Hoy? —preguntó con mayor seriedad.

Él consultó su reloj:

—Mañana.

Ella guardó silencio, pero claramente a modo de asentimiento.

—Eso es lo que yo entiendo por aceptarme tal como soy —dijo luego—. En cuanto muchacha, bien lo sabe usted, soy… singular.

—¡Sí, bien sé yo cómo eres! —exclamó él con una extraña fatiga dentro de su ternura.

Pero ella, bajo la sombra de sus escrúpulos, siguió explicando:

—Muchas de nosotras, casi todas nosotras (tal como hace ya tiempo usted percibió y demostró opinar), somos singulares actualmente. No podemos evitarlo. En realidad no es culpa nuestra. Hay tantísimas otras cosas que son singulares que, estando tan inmersas en todas ellas, naturalmente *nosotras* hemos de serlo. — A ella patentemente esto le parecía más meridiano que nunca, y su conciencia de ello encontró renovada expresión; de tal forma que ella habría podido ser, cuando concluyó, una persona mucho más vieja que su amigo—: Todo es distinto de como era antiguamente.

—Sí, todo —repuso él con un tono de sabiduría final—. Eso es lo que él habría debido aceptar.

—¿Igual que lo ha aceptado *usted*? —Una vez más Nanda aparecía (y ahora por completo) como adalid de la más elevada justicia—: Huy, él está más chapado a la antigua que usted.

—Mucho más —dijo el señor Longdon con extraño semblante.

—Él lo intentó —insistió la muchacha—; hizo un enorme esfuerzo. Pero no pudo. Y con toda la razón… desde su propio punto de vista.

Antes de contestar a esto, su visitante recogió su sombrero y bastón, que durante unos instantes acapararon su atención.

—Habría debido ser él quien se casase…

—…¿con la pequeña Aggie? Sí —dijo Nanda.

Se habían llegado hasta la puerta, junto a la cual nuevamente el señor Longdon la miró a los ojos:

—Y en ese caso Mitchy…

Pero ella lo hizo callar con veloz ademán:

—No: ¡ni siquiera en ese caso!

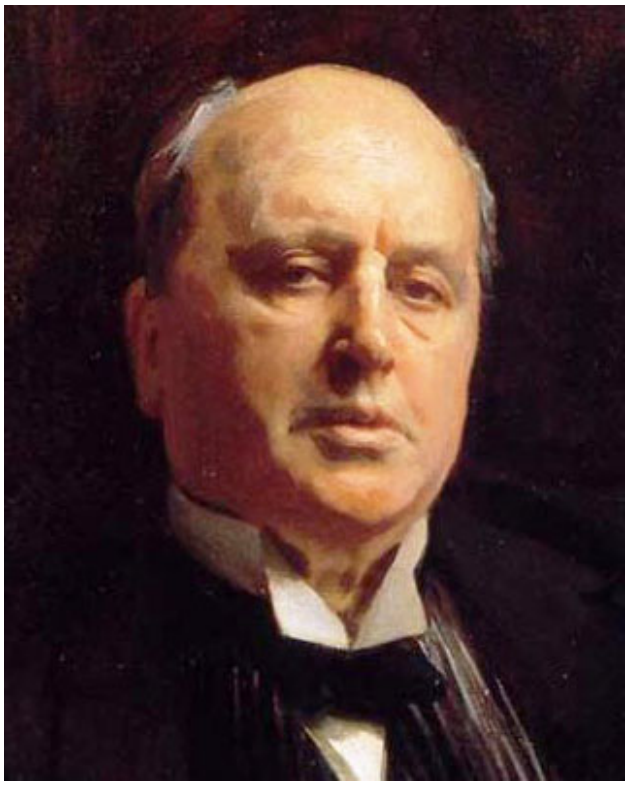
De esta guisa, antes de que él se fuera volvieron a permanecer unos instantes frente a frente.

—¿Estás inquieta por Mitchy?

Ella vaciló, pero al final lo reveló:

—Sí. ¿Se da cuenta? Heme ahí.

—Me doy cuenta. Henos ahí. Bien —dijo el señor Longdon—, pues mañana.



HENRY JAMES nació el 15 de abril de 1843 en Nueva York, en el seno de una acomodada familia de origen irlandés.

Cursó sus primeros estudios en distintas ciudades de Europa: Londres, París, Ginebra. En 1862, en Estados Unidos, inició la carrera de Derecho en la Universidad de Harvard, actividad que combinaba con la publicación de relatos en distintas revistas literarias.

En 1875, James se estableció en Inglaterra, con poco más de 30 años, y en 1915 obtuvo la nacionalidad inglesa. Sus novelas, relatos y ensayos revelan los contrastes entre ambos mundos. Novelista, dramaturgo y crítico, ha influido de manera decisiva en el desarrollo de la novela moderna tanto en su país de origen, como en la literatura universal.

Henry James murió el 28 de febrero de 1916, en su casa de campo de Rye, Sussex, dejando un exquisito legado a la historia de la literatura tras más de 50 años de carrera literaria: 20 novelas, 112 relatos y 12 obras de teatro, además de diversas críticas literarias y teatrales.

Su estilo, que se caracteriza por la descripción psicológica de los personajes, adquirió con el tiempo una gran elegancia y complejidad, oculta tras argumentos aparentemente sencillos. La perspicaz penetración psicológica en el mundo interior de sus personajes lo ha encumbrado como uno de los más exquisitos maestros del monólogo interior.

Notas

[1] Se refiere al conjunto de todos los prefacios de la «Edición de Nueva York». *(N. del T.)*. <<

[2] Pseudónimo literario de Sibylle Gabrielle Marie-Antoinette Riquetti de Mirabeau, condesa de Martel de Janville, popular escritora hacia 1890, cuyas novelas constan únicamente de diálogo y suelen centrarse en intrigas eróticas *(N. del T.)*. <<

[3] Dramaturgo popular en aquellos tiempos y especializado en comedias costumbristas. *(N. del T.)*. <<

[4] Se refiere a Alejandro Dumas hijo, que era, junto con Henrik Ibsen, el dramaturgo que James prefería de entre sus coetáneos. *(N. del T.)*. <<

[5] Juego de palabras con el verbo *to pretend* (y con su derivado *pretence*) que significa tanto «intentar» como «fingir»; en realidad, también en español se da esa ambigüedad en el verbo pretender (y en su derivado pretensión), pero salta mucho menos a la vista y se recurre a ella mucho menos frecuentemente, por lo cual me he tomado la grosera libertad —que sin duda habría soliviantado a Henry James— de recalcar esta sutileza. *(N. del T.)*. <<

[6] Un cabriolé (*hansom*) era un carruaje muy elegante pero abierto y sólo parcialmente cubierto por un techo, mientras que un «cuatro ruedas» (*four-wheeler*) resultaba menos distinguido pero estaba completamente cerrado y aislado del exterior, lo cual según James es la predilección de todo filósofo. *(N. del T.)*. <<

[7] Juego de palabras con la expresión inglesa *our head*, que también significa «nuestro superior». *(N. del T.)*.

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[8] Ya por entonces era internacionalmente proverbial el dicho «Ver Nápoles y después morir». *(N. del T.)*. < <

[9] Inicio del refrán inglés «A un hombre se lo admite por diez chelines» que viene a ser el equivalente de nuestro «Quien algo quiere, algo le cuesta». *(N. del T.)*. < <

[10] Cfr. Cicerón, *De la adivinación*, Libro Segundo, XXIV: «Conócese aquel antiguo dicho de Catón, que se maravillaba de que un adivino no soltase la carcajada al ver a otro adivino». *(N. del T.)*. < <

[11] En inglés, *they don't come down*, que también puede traducirse como «*no* dan dinero». *(N. del T.)*. < <

[12] Esto es más que un mero chiste. Aquí Henry James recurre a una acepción poco conocida del verbo «inventar», derivado etimológicamente del latín *invenio*, que es «toparse con» o «encontrar». *(N. del T.)*. < <

[13] Téngase presente que la acción de esta novela transcurre —aunque no se especifiquen fechas exactas— durante la década 1890-1899. *(N. del T.)*. < <

[14] Por entonces era sumamente inhabitual que las mujeres fumaran, máxime en público. *(N. del T.)*. < <

[15] Localidad con un famoso balneario frecuentado por la alta sociedad europea. *(N. del T.)*. < <

[16] Se refiere a la *Society for Psychical Research* (Sociedad de Investigaciones Psíquicas), fundada en 1882 y consagrada a los fenómenos parapsicológicos y sobrenaturales. El célebre filósofo y psicólogo William James, hermano del autor de esta novela, llegó a ser su presidente. *(N. del T.)*. < <

[17] Juego de palabras en el original: «*every Ring at Baireuth will certainly have been rung*»; se refiere a *El Anillo del Nibelungo*. Bayreuth es la ciudad bávara donde se celebra anualmente el Festival Wagner. *(N. del T.)*. <<

[18] Personajes de la comedia de Shakespeare *Mucho ruido y pocas nueces*. *(N. del T.)*. <<

[19] En inglés, *the hooks that are sat upon*, que también puede traducirse como «los libros que son denigrados», lo cual aprovecha James para hacer un juego de palabras en este párrafo y en el siguiente. *(N. del T.)*. <<

[20] En inglés, *drawback*, que también puede traducirse como «descuento» o «rebaja». *(N. del T.)*. <<

[21] En inglés, *A handsome present*, que también puede traducirse como «Una sustanciosa donación». *(N. del T.)*. <<

[22] Cervantescamente, Henry James se olvida de que al inicio de este capítulo ha dejado establecido que lo que traía Mitchy era un bastón. *(N. del T.)*. <<

[23] En inglés, *how he could come and go*. La inevitablemente tosca traducción española de esta expresión no puede preservar su notable ambigüedad; lo más probable es que en este contexto signifique que el señor Longdon debía advertir que Vanderbank puede «ir y venir» tranquilamente a esa casa ya que Nanda no le guarda ningún rencor al considerar que todas las culpas son de ella misma; pero asimismo puede significar que la muchacha está resignada a que Vanderbank desaparezca completamente de su vida aunque participase intensamente en la misma durante una época; incluso puede hacer alusión a cuando Vanderbank tomó la decisión narrada en el Libro Noveno, o sea «presentarse y marcharse» sin subir a ver a Nanda (de hecho, así es como parece interpretarla el señor Longdon, a juzgar por su réplica en el párrafo inmediato); amén de cualquier otra interpretación que el lector quiera darle, teniendo en cuenta que no tiene por qué significar lo mismo para cada uno de los dos interlocutores de esta escena. *(N. del T.)*. <<